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TOWARDS MORNING

Towards Morning

By

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PART I

TOWARDS MORNING

CHAPTER I

I

HE awoke violently. In the very midst of his dream he had been shot out of a cannon's mouth straight into consciousness. Yet for a moment he could not remember where he was. He seemed to be clinging to the outer edge of a monster wheel which whirled him through darkness till his brain went sick and giddy. Half-remembered landmarks flew past him. He clutched at them, trying to stay his mad flight. But they slipped through his fingers. The pace was at first too frightful, his clutch too feeble. But gradually the wheel began to revolve more quietly. The landmarks settled in their accustomed places. He clung to one of them—it was the big majolica stove just opposite—and this time his grip held. The wheel jerked and came to a standstill and there was the Herr Amtschreiber Felde in his plush-covered chair and the grey early morning light peering at him through the cracks in the closed shutters.

He did not move at first. His body ached all over, but he was glad to sit quiet. Although it was still too dark to see anything clearly it made him feel more secure to recognise the dim outline of familiar objects—the table in the middle of the room,

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the four chairs drawn up stiffly in place, the plush-covered sofa with the carved wooden back, the Venetian mirror shining like a polished shield on the opposite wall, the big majolica stove——

It was the stove which held his attention longest. It explained his dream, and he always liked to have things explained. As soon as he had found a natural cause for it the dream did not trouble him so much. Yet it had been rather terrible. Even now the memory of it held a queer, uncanny fascination. Without being terrified any more he could still understand why he had been afraid. It had been an unusual dream in so far that nothing had really happened in it. He had been sitting in his chair, close to the warmth, drowsy with fatigue and worry and excitement, and then suddenly he found himself in an empty plain. He was quite alone, but afar off against the horizon loomed a Shape so black and huge that it shut out the light of the sun. Its one red eye watched the Herr Amtschreiber. It brightened and grew dim and brightened again, but it never let go of him. And he sat there, puny and cowering and stark naked and waited. He was not surprised that in spite of his puniness the eye should be so intent upon him. He had a dim but profound knowledge that they were vital to one another—that if the eye closed he himself would go out into nothingness, and that if he could have turned away his gaze the eye would be extinguished for ever. But he did not want to turn away. That was the odd part of it. Though he knew quite well that the eye would kill him in the end he was fascinated—intoxicated. He felt that in a minute he would jump up and dance and scream and yell unknown blasphemies till he dropped—dead.

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He, the respectable, respected Herr Amtschreiber, felt that he was going to dance—stark naked—and scream and yell blasphemies. But then, mercifully, he had wakened just in time. And there he was, in his plush arm-chair, stiff and aching from the embrace of the carved wooden arms, but fully clad, and not even knowing what the blasphemies would have been.

It was nothing but the stove after all. He remembered now that he had gone to sleep staring at the fire glowing fiercely behind the glass-covered door. He had sat too close—far too close—and the heat had given him nightmare. Now the fire was almost out. It had a sullen, dying look, and the atmosphere of the room was dank and stuffy.

The door opened. A woman came shuffling softly over the parquet flooring and loomed up at the Herr Amtschreiber's side. She carried a funnel-shaped coal scuttle, and, opening the slot of the stove, jerked in the coal with an angry rattle.

The Herr Amtschreiber stirred and stretched himself.

"Has the Herr slept well?" she asked with a singing South German intonation.

"Na—es geht." He got up and limped painfully about the room. He had a bad taste in his mouth, and his eyes were heavy and sore with unrestful sleep. The woman came over to the window and threw open the shutters and the light snatched the misty grey covers from the furniture and left it stark and bleak in its ugliness. The Herr Amtschreiber stood before the Venetian glass and peered anxiously over his spectacles at the reflection of a little man with a small pale face and a fair straggling moustache and round blue eyes. The eyes were

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young, but the face was middle-aged and faded. The Herr Amtschreiber sighed. He jerked the chocolate-coloured coat higher up on to the sloping shoulders and wriggled his legs in the baggy trousers. The shot-silk tie had worked up under one ear. He tied it carefully and fastened the low collar and smoothed his thin, fair hair. "Na—es geht schon," he repeated sleepily.

The servant came back carrying a round tray with a white china coffee-pot and a plate of rusks, which she set down at the end of the table. She was tall and broadly built. Her body showed soft rounded lines under the dark cotton dress, but her bare arms were strong and hard as a man's. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, and sad, and beautiful, and stupid as the eyes of a patient, over-burdened animal.

"The breakfast is there, Herr Felde."

He grunted and came and sat down. He dipped a rusk into the coffee and began to eat nervously. Every now and then he stopped crunching to listen, his head a little on one side, his brows knitted.

"Is—is it all right, Anna?"

"Oh, yes, yes, Herr Felde. The Sister says she has been asleep. She is asleep now. It will all go splendidly."

"Yes, of course. I mustn't disturb her. I have got to be at the Bureau early this morning. The Grand Duke is to open the new wing. I ought to be gone now. Bring me my hat and coat. Good God! what is it?"

He had leapt to his feet as though the cry from behind the closed double doors had been the sting of a serpent. It was a terrible cry, not loud, but pressed down and running over with agony. It was the cry of someone unsuspecting who has opened a door and

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looked down suddenly into a pit of horror. The Herr Amtschreiber stood trembling with clasped hands, his mouth gaping.

"What is it? What is it?" he repeated helplessly.

The servant Anna looked at him. She, too, was pale, but also she was smiling. The smile had some strange kinship with the cry that came creeping up to them through the stillness in low, advancing waves. It was world old. It lit the patient, stupid face with an unfathomable wisdom.

"The Herr Amtschreiber shouldn't worry. It is just beginning, that is all. It must be gone through. It is always so."

"Always? It is impossible. Dear God in heaven, how do you know?"

"It is always so," she repeated stolidly. "My mother had ten children. I was the fourth. Six times have I heard my mother cry like that."

He was walking up and down the room, almost running, like some distraught hunted little animal, with the vibrating, deepening cry at his heels.

"Ten times! Ten times! It's incredible. Intolerable. Why isn't the doctor here? Has the man no conscience? Doesn't he think he'll get his fees? Anna—how long—how long can that go on——?"

"It depends." She gathered the breakfast things together. "Some have it more easily than others. The Frau Amtschreiber is not so young——"

He stood still suddenly, close to the double door, his soft felt hat squeezed between his nervous bony hands. The round blue eyes peered blindly over the crooked spectacles.

"No—no—we are not young, either of us. Is that our fault? One can't be reckless. One must do

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things decently—in order—standes-gemäsz—a Grand Ducal official can't marry anyhow, can he? One must wait. But I didn't know. I thought nature wouldn't punish people for doing things decently. Anna, if I could see her for a minute——"

"The Herr Amtschreiber will be late."

"Late? Yes; and, dear God in heaven, his Royal Highness is visiting the Rathaus himself. Some of us will get an Orde. If only I—— But my Bureau-Chef doesn't like me. I don't know why. I have always done my best. One must be careful. It wouldn't do to be late. Anna—if anything—anything happened you must come at once."

She helped him into his overcoat and brought him out into the dark, stuffy passage. The cry had become a whimper. It had lost dignity. The revolt and passion had gone out of it. It was the pitiful, exhausted protest of a spirit already broken.

The Herr Amtschreiber shook his head.

"It isn't right—it isn't right."

"It will go well," Anna said soothingly. "The Herr Amtschreiber will see—it will go well."

Though he was so late he lingered for a long minute outside the massive, grey-faced house. He felt dazed and battered and sore. It was as though he had run away out of a terrible battle. He was amazed that everything in the street was just as usual. He looked at a little boy in his blue overall, his satchel strapped to his shoulders like a knapsack, so grave and earnest and anxious. He looked at the big infantry soldier coming along with his clumsy and effective swagger, and he felt that he saw them for the first time. He was amazed that he had never realised them before. They were stages in one development—and the first stage of all was the sound of

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a woman crying. They meant fear and remorse and pain.

He saw how terrible they were.

He looked up at the window in the top storey of the big house.

"It wasn't like her to cry like that—she never cried like that before——"

Then he remembered how late he was. He walked fast but with dignity till he came to a side street, and then he began to run.

II

He was not used to it. His lungs ached and his knees shook under him. And he was ashamed. He felt red with shame right to his very soul. He knew that *Gross-herzogliche Staatsbeamten* never ran. Nor were they ever late. They were always at their post, weaving their little pattern into the vast national design with absolute efficiency and dignity, without haste or disorder. Now he was late and running—and running absurdly—a sort of shambling trot, his face very red, his glasses jogging on the bridge of his nose.

A vague, unhappy anger ran through his shame. He did not know with whom or with what he was angry. It had something to do with Clärchen and that terrible crying. Either she shouldn't have had to cry like that or he shouldn't have had to run. There was something wrong about it all. It did not belong to the neat scheme of his life. It was as though a maniac had burst into his office at the Stadtamt and thrown all his papers out of the window. He wanted to cry too. The tears made the rims of his eyes red—tears of pity and worry and sheer physical weariness.

A man came out of a house at the corner of the

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street. He was tall and broad with consciously squared shoulders and a strong slow step. He seemed to be leading an invisible procession and to be gravely, not unworthily, aware of his responsibility.

The Herr Amtschreiber stopped running. He choked back his gasping breath and set his glasses straight. It was as if he had suddenly remembered his own little bit of a procession and was trying to call it to order. Three paces away he swept off his hat and carried it reverentially.

The Geheimrat Köhler blinked at him, hesitated, and finally stopped—actually! Though he had married Clärchen's sister the Herr Amtschreiber had not expected more than a nod—had perhaps not wanted more. For he was dreadfully late. Yet he was glad, too. He wished some of his colleagues could see the Geheimrat patting him on the shoulder.

"Na, mein Lieber, how goes it? My wife asked me to inquire. She would have called herself but you know how it is. She is to have audience with the Grand Duchess this afternoon. With regard to the Frauen Verein, you know. Still—she was very anxious. The Frau Gemahlin is doing well, eh?"

The Herr Amtschreiber made a little bow.

"It's very kind of you—please thank the Frau Geheimrätin. I don't know—I—I am rather worried—terribly worried." The rising tears in his heart almost welled over. "When I left she was crying—not just crying—groaning. It was awful. I—I don't know what to do. It's intolerable that anyone should have to suffer like that. I can't believe that it's right. I can't believe that everyone has to suffer——"

Herr Köhler burst out laughing. He had a hard, rasping voice which he retained from his Garde-Leutnant days in Berlin.

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"My dear fellow, you're too newly married, that's what's the matter. Women have to go through with it. It's their duty. They were made for it. Mustn't make a fuss. Mustn't encourage *them* to make a fuss. We can't do with parasites in this country. Everyone to his duty. We fight—they bear children. There's too much of the old German Sentimentalitäten Dusel left. Must be rooted out, eh, Felde?"

The Herr Amtschreiber nodded seriously. He felt suddenly stern and stiffened as though the Geheimrat had rammed a poker down the back of his coat.

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Na, gut. It must be a boy, eh? You know the good old custom—the first child to the Kaiser. A fine boy. See to it, my dear fellow."

The Geheimrat laughed and the Herr Amtschreiber laughed too. He had not thought about the child at all. He had only thought about Clärchen. He began to see things in their proper perspective.

"We'll do our best," he said.

"That's good. Look here, if it is a boy I will stand god-father—I'll—I'll do what I can. We must make something of him. Something first class. If we realised that every child is a cog in the national machine there would be fewer failures. Young Felde mustn't be a failure, eh?"

"No, no. It's very good of you—very good. I shall tell Clara. Thank you, Herr Geheimrat." Though they were brothers-in-law he could never have said, "Thank you, my dear fellow," or patted the great man on the back. "It will comfort Clara," he added unsteadily.

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"Ach was! She shouldn't need comforting. She should be only too glad. But no doubt she is. A sister of Mathilde's is sure to know her duty. You're too soft, Felde, just a little too soft. It doesn't do. These are stern times. One must carry one's head high."

The Herr Amtschreiber lifted his head involuntarily.

"Assuredly, Herr Geheimrat——"

"Na—also! Good luck. And when the happy event takes place you must let us know."

"Assuredly."

The two men bowed and shook hands. Then the Geheimrat walked on at the head of his procession. The Herr Amtschreiber turned out of the quiet street into the Ludwig's Platz.

He did not hurry any more. It was so late that a few minutes either way had ceased to matter.

III

The Rathaus looked out on to a wide, old-fashioned square. It was a grave building but neither austere nor arrogant. Its windows were full of flowers and two tall shrubs, like sentinels, kept guard over the stone steps. Across the way and on either hand its low-roofed neighbours bore it goodly company. They were of the same generation. They had known the old Rathaus from their childhood and respected it, though without servility. They knew what was due to it and to themselves.

In the midst of the square stood the tombstone of the Grand Duke who had given his name to the town. He had loved the place and had wished to be buried in its heart. For that reason perhaps his

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tombstone had a quaint air of having grown up out of the cobbles—to be a part of them.

The townsfolk were rather ashamed of their Rathaus and of the square generally. They told strangers they were going to pull the whole place down and build up something that would be more in keeping with the massive, flamboyant modernity of the Kaiserstrasse. The square troubled them. It held aloof from their clanging trams and vociferous motor-cars, wrapping itself in grave civic dignity.

The Herr Amtschreiber went in by a side entrance. He had seen the sober carriage and pair with the gold-braided footmen and the little knot of idlers and he knew just what had happened. He could not think of Clärchen any more. A cold fear had laid hold of him. But he could not hurry. He was like a truant schoolboy, dragging leaden feet.

The Staatszimmer was full of his colleagues. They stood in a long row, very stiff and upright, giving their elderly figures a martial bearing. In front of them the Grand Duke paced up and down with the chief officials, like a general on parade. He was tall and grey-haired, with the remote and melancholy expression of a man for ever playing a part which wearies and disgusts him. The grey military coat and spurred heels did not make him a soldier.

"I thank you, gentlemen," he said.

The Herr Amtschreiber stood at the end of the row. He had forgotten to take off his overcoat and his soft hat was clutched convulsively in his right hand. The Staatszimmer was thick with a murky twilight, but through the long windows opposite he caught a glimpse of the square glittering in winter sunshine. The Grand Duke and his civilian staff moved against the light like faceless shadows. But

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the Herr Amtschreiber knew that they were looking at him—staring at him as though he had been some strange animal. He knew that his colleagues were thinking of him with a mixture of gloating self-satisfaction and pity.

"Poor devil! Glad I'm not in his shoes."

The Grand Duke, cap in hand, had reached the door.

"I wish you good morning, gentlemen."

They bowed stiffly and expressionlessly. When the door closed they relaxed, stamping their feet and moving their arms like schoolboys after a long restraint. The Herr Amtschreiber stood apart. He tried to say something, to laugh and look unconcerned, but he knew that they saw through him and knew that he was sick with the premonition of disgrace.

"Well," he thought, "he can't kill me."

They heard the clatter of hoofs on the cobbles and presently a man came back into the room. He was short and thick set with light blue protuberant eyes. He came up to the Herr Amtschreiber, so close to him that it seemed as though he meant to tread him down under his feet.

"You choose a strange occasion to over-sleep yourself, Herr Felde," he said loudly and coldly. "What do you suppose the Grand Duke thinks of an administration in which the officials behave as you do? His Royal Highness honours us with his presence and you stroll in an hour late—your coat on anyhow, with a dirty collar—and—and crumpled clothes. My God—one would think you had been drinking."

The Herr Amtschreiber's lips trembled.

"Excuse me—my wife is ill—I was up all night——"

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"What is that to me? Do you think the work of the State has to stop still because your wife has a headache? Let me tell you, Herr Felde, we expect efficiency in this office—efficiency and again efficiency. Those who can't live up to our standards—well, they can take their talents elsewhere, that's all."

The Herr Amtschreiber did not answer. He made a little bow and crept away to his office at the back of the Rathaus. His knees shook under him. It was as though he had been whipped in public before all his fellows. But the shame did not matter. The veiled threat mattered. His Bureau Chief hated him—had always hated him. And an *entlassene Beamte*—a middle-aged official dismissed for inefficiency—what was he? An old circus-horse, trained to gallop round and round the ring, thrust out to find a living on the streets!

And there was Clärchen and the mysterious, half-realised being who was coming—and the Geheimrat who would shrug his flat, broad shoulders.

"He was bound to fail. Too soft—much too soft. It doesn't do; these are stern times."

The Herr Amtschreiber bent over his papers. Though his head was hot and heavy he worked with a feverish accuracy. The machine revolved round him, and he who was just a little cog, infinitely significant, infinitely insignificant, revolved in measure. If he failed there would be a moment's hitch. The engineer would come burrowing down to the cause and wrench him off and throw him to the scrap-heap. There would be no recrimination, no explanation. It was appallingly simple. The cog mattered only so long as it served its purpose. It was the machine—the machine that mattered always.

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The Herr Amtschreiber forgot himself. The atmosphere of the dingy office stifled all personality, all feeling. It smelt of all the little souls that had sweated out their life there, and of something moribund, as though an alien and evil spirit had crept into the old Rathaus and was eating out its heart.

No one spoke to him. His colleagues held aloof with an air of condemnation. He felt no surprise or pain. It was just. He had sinned. And then they, too, had the spectre of failure at their elbows. They, too, were afraid. Not only for themselves. They were thinking of the machine. It was as though at the back of their minds was the vision of its collapse—of a monstrous cataclysm.

At last someone came up to him and spoke. It was old Heim, who had grown grey and bent in the Service. He had never risen above the position of a clerk, and now he was near the end. A cancer ate at his vitals and soon he would be going into the hospital to die. But he was holding on to his office as though it were his life.

"This has just come for you, Herr Felde."

The Herr Amtschreiber tore open the untidy envelope. The slip of paper inside was smeared with an illiterate scrawl.

"If the Herr Amtschreiber would please come at once. The Herr Doktor says so.—ANNA."

He sat there blinking over his glasses. His vacant, wandering blue eyes rested at last in a fascinated stare on the broad back of his chief. His hands began to tremble and the slip of paper fluttered down on to the floor.

"I can't——" he thought over and over again. "I can't——"

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"Herr Amtschreiber——"

He turned stupidly. Old Heim was leaning against the desk, his face yellow and withered as old parchment, his dry lips opened in a smothered gasp.

"Well?"

"Herr Felde, if I could be excused this afternoon—I am not well—you know how it is—the pain—it's very bad——"

Something leapt up out of the dark places of the Herr Amtschreiber's heart. It was tigerish, bestial. It had lain there all night, ringed in by enemies, goaded and starved, gnawing the roots of its hiding-place. As it leapt upon its victim the Herr Amtschreiber could have screamed out in an ecstasy of relief.

His hand lying on the desk clenched itself to a fist.

"Do you perhaps take this for a hospital, Herr Heim?" he asked.

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then the old man turned away. He went back to his desk and climbed on to his stool—painfully, like a tired child.

The Herr Amtschreiber bent over his work. The rims of his eyes stung as though they had been burnt with fire.

IV

The cheap lamp nailed to the wall had been shaded and in the half-obscurity where one form merged itself in another the voice sounded faint and far off as the memory of a dream.

"Our own," it said; "our very own."

The Herr Amtschreiber pressed his cheek against the hand that lay so heavily upon the quilt. Gently it was withdrawn, and fumbling like the hand of

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someone newly blind rested at last on his bowed head, soothing him with a pitying, drowsy movement. "Mustn't cry, Männchen—it's all right now—it was very bad—but it's over—and it's worth while—to have something of our very own."

"I am so proud," he whispered, "it is so wonderful——"

"A life we've made together, to take care of, to make happier than we have been."

"Our son—our son——" he repeated simply.

The doctor and the nurse standing deep in shadow smiled palely as though this high-song of thanksgiving, so familiar, so eternal, could never lose its pathetic humour. The doctor bent down and touched the kneeling man upon the shoulder.

"Come!" he said. "You must let her sleep."

The Herr Amtschreiber stumbled to his feet. He did not look at the face that seemed to float like a white flower on a dark tide, nor at the unknown who slept in the low cradle. He went out, feeling drunkenly, through the door which the doctor held open for him. His teeth chattered in fever and he put his hands against the stove, letting its warm comfort steal up through his veins.

The plump little doctor watched him, still smiling and stroking his neat beard.

"You will take it more calmly next time," he said prosaically. "The first is always a shock. One takes children so much for granted—and other people's children are never wonderful. But you mustn't excite her, you know. It won't do, either for her or for the child."

The Herr Amtschreiber lifted his head.

"I couldn't come," he muttered. "You see, there was work at the office——"

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"Of course. Very admirable of you. It's our old German sense of duty. As it happened it was all right. But I had an anxious quarter of an hour. You see, your wife is not so young any more—and in that case there is always danger. I thought I might have to choose between the two of them—suddenly. There was no time to ask you. But she chose. A brave woman. I congratulate you, my friend."

"And the child——"

"A fine boy—a regular little Grenadier." Dr. Roth picked up his hat, chuckling. "I'll be round to-morrow. No, don't bother to see me out—you're not fit. Take a good glass of something to steady you. Good night, good night, my dear fellow."

The door closed. But a minute later Anna came in bearing the lamp. She looked at him, her big shadowed eyes heavy with weariness. Yet there was a smile in them—that same slow smile of deep, unconscious wisdom.

"The Herr Amtschreiber is glad that it is a boy?" she asked softly.

"Yes—yes——"

"One is always glad when it is a son," she said. "When I was born my mother cried. There are too many of us——"

"But you have brothers?" he muttered absently.

"Oh, yes. There are four—two are in America. And two are serving their time. It is not easy to work the fields without them. In the harvest time my mother goes out and gathers in the corn. She is old now—so old——"

He did not hear her. She went out soft-footed as she had come, and he stretched his arms above his head so that he seemed to himself to grow young and strong and tall. The shuddering fear had gone. He

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was a god. His joy lifted him out of the grey crowd where he belonged. For a moment romance touched him with her golden finger and illuminated him. Once before it had come to him—on his wedding night when the love that had been so cramped with little sordid cares had burst its bonds and shown herself royal and reckless even in them. It would come again perhaps—surely once again at least with the last romance of all.

He went slowly to the table and sat down. A life-old instinct held steadfast in him. There were things to be done—a note to the Geheimrat—an order to the printer—a notice to be inserted in the daily paper. He drew that morning's *Tagblatt* towards him and turned over the pages. How big was the notice to be? Schulrat Vossler had taken the half of two columns for his daughter. One couldn't do less. That would cost over ten marks. Ten marks from a weekly seventy. And there would be the doctor and the nurse and extra-help and the chemist's bill——

Perhaps a smaller notice would do.

The music of a military band escorting a regiment home to its barracks came in a thrilling wave from the distance. It filled the drab, conventional room with a fierce glow of colour. It blew fear away as a wind drives off a creeping mist.

The Herr Amtschreiber sat back and dreamed.

"Happier than we have been!"

Yes, that was it. Not a failure, struggling and ineffectual, not even a cog playing its little part faithfully in the great whole, but an eagle mounting in great flights, a new force driving the machine faster and more splendidly to its goal. A judge, a general, an admiral, a prince of commerce. These things happened. They would pinch and save. They would

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manage somehow so that he should spread his young wings freely. In him all that they had dreamed would come to flower. He would be their hope, their ambition, their life.

They would call him Helmut. It was German and heroic. It spread a light about it. Helmut—bright courage.

He took a clean sheet of paper and began to draw up the announcement. He made it bigger and more splendid even than that of the Schulrat Vossler. His lips trembled as he wrote :

"Herr and Frau Felde joyfully announce to their friends that this day a beautiful boy has been born to them."

He framed it in thick black lines so that it looked like a shout of triumph. When it was done he dropped forward with his face between his hands.

"God grant it !" he whispered. "God grant it !"

There was quiet and warmth within and without. The sweet exhaustion of tears crept up about him in a drowsy mist. And so the Herr Amtschreiber slept—suddenly and peacefully. And in his sleep he heard an infant crying.

CHAPTER II

I

AT the bottom of all memories were Heini and Fritz Schnäützchen. There had never been a time when Heini was not. In a nebulous world of vague, gigantic shapes, now dwindling into distance, Heini stood out clear and definite as a rock. His beaming, never changing smile, his stiff sawdust limbs stretched out in jolly welcome, had received the first word and the first conscious caress. He had taken part in the first perilous two-legged journey across the dining-room. He had suffered in the disaster. His painted features were dimmed with the smear of many tears and the jammy kisses of a consoled partner. If he grew less sightly with the months that were then as eternities, and if there were times when the most ardent shrank from his proffered embrace, to Helmut he was still the perfect friend whose being had been linked to his by bands of almost mystic understanding.

Quite other was the history of Fritz Schnäützchen, who had come later in the glorious period of pram-emancipation. He was a stray, the Feldes said, apologetically, and had been "picked up" because of Helmut's absurd infatuation, but Helmut knew better. He knew that they had chosen each other—that they "belonged" according to an unwritten and secret law. One day in the forest they had met for the first time. Helmut had been playing at his mother's side

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with the fallen fir-cones—a mysterious, silent game which his mother never understood—and suddenly Fritz Schnäützchen had appeared from among the trees. They had stood gazing at each other for a long time, not saying anything or moving, and then Fritz Schnäützchen had quietly come to a decision. He followed Helmut's heels to the big, grey block of flats in the Louisenstrasse, and had waited patiently on the doorstep whilst Helmut howled within for his adoption. In the end their love had triumphed, and every week a twenty-five pfennig piece was set aside towards a dog-tax which was in theory to be Helmut's birthday present.

There was no very clear explanation for Schnäützchen's unusual and slightly grotesque nomenclature except perhaps in the fact that he himself was unusual and more than slightly grotesque. The "Schnäützchen" may have had its origin in the raceless snub nose which must have been derived from a pug ancestor—the Fritz was unquestionably utilitarian. One could not shout "Schnäützchen" with any comfort, and certainly not with dignity.

He was, in truth, not beautiful and not even young. He was a kind of dog all to himself, baulking description, and the years weighed heavily upon him. One saw that life had not been kind, and behind his dim, brown eyes was the sad knowledge of inexplicable human cruelty. He shrank from men—even from the Herr Amtschreiber—and women he tolerated wearily. He went with no one, followed no one, save his chosen god. Helmut he loved. Helmut he followed. When the boy played his strange games with his strange toys, the dog would sit by and watch gravely. When Helmut ran, Fritz Schnäützchen girded up his old loins and ran too—

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panting but indomitable. In the hours which Helmut spent in the Kindergarten Schnäützchen watched with Heini for his return. Or sometimes Frau Felde would take them with her when she went to fetch her son, but this was not often, because she was just a little ashamed of both of them.

Between Heini and Fritz Schnäützchen there must have been some alliance. It subtly excluded Helmut. They made it, as it were, over his head and without his knowledge. But it was for his protection. They were older and wiser with inarticulate wisdom, and they loved him. They had their life from him and were ready to give it up for his sake, and knowing this of each other they became comrades. There could have been no other explanation for a dog's devotion to a rag doll.

As to Heini his attitude and his expression were less scrutable. He embraced his ally as he embraced everyone, with open arms and a wide engaging smile.

With these two on either side of him, Helmut came through the fairyland of babyhood.

II

To Helmut his mother and father were grey people. They were the same colour as the flight of stone steps which led up to their flat and the dim hall and the faded sitting-room. For a long time he did not even realise that they had features, but recognised them by instinct from the midst of other grey people. And they had a disconcerting knack of dwindling and growing. For instance, on Sunday in the big Lutheran Church in the Westendstrasse they grew bigger, as though the slow rolling hymns and packed mass of other dull clad people, singing

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with all their might, reinforced them and gave them confidence and dignity. But after the service when they walked out together in the forest which girdled the town like a deep green sea, they faded again. They walked stiffly and anxiously in their best clothes. They looked to right and left and bowed to everyone they knew, and talked about them in low tones, and the vividness and straight, tall strength of the trees made them colourless and subdued.

But even when they were most faded, most grey, they were still omnipresent. Heini and Schnäützchen were bright and definite realities, but they came and went. His mother and father were about him always. Like a low cloud they encompassed his going and his coming. He loved them, but a queer pain mingled itself with his love. A nerve united them to one another, but it was a nerve that ached under secret, constant pressure. He knew, though, without reasoning, that they were always thinking about him, watching him, waiting. He felt that when they were alone they talked about him. Even when they talked of other things—of the Herr Geheimrat, or the Bureau Chef, or the hope of promotion, or the cost of living, they looked at him as though he were the real significance of these things.

Once when he had been playing with Schnäützchen and Heini his mother had called him, and he had not instantly obeyed. At last when he came, panting and rosy-cheeked, half laughing, half defiant, his mother had put her hands on his shoulders and he had felt them tremble. Her plain, round face was close to his, and for the first time she came out of her mist and he saw her clearly. He remembered her as she was then ever afterwards, and for the first time, too, he saw himself.

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"Helmut—you must obey—obey always," she said. "Unless you obey you will never command, you will never be strong, you will never be a great man. You will never be of any use. We have all got to obey."

"Why?" he had asked truculently.

"It is our duty."

"What is duty?"

"The greatest thing in the world." It was strange what hardness, what sternness came into her face. And yet behind it all he felt the pain. "Duty is what we owe our country. A sense of duty is the greatest German virtue. Promise me, Helmut—promise me——"

He did not know what she asked but he took a deep breath.

"I'll try," he said solemnly. "I'll try hard."

She caressed him with hard, eager hands.

"We love you, Helmut — you must always remember that we love you."

And hereafter his games were never quite the same, and their love weighed upon him like a burden. A spectre stalked beside him, waiting for its moment to seize him and devour him.

It was tall and grim and pitiless. And it was called Duty.

III

He believed most in the things he could not see. In spite of the Geheimrat who explained the mechanism carefully to him, he believed in a little friendly spirit who, when you rang the bell outside the big door downstairs, lifted the latch and let you in. He believed in a brilliant, dashing person who could fill a pitch dark room with a blaze of light, and every

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now and then turned crusty and wouldn't. He could almost see the crowds of tiny grey men pushing the trams along and clanging the bell. He did see them at night in the Stadtgarten when the band played and the lights twinkled, and the black-coated waiters ran hither and thither like worried moths. He saw them then under the shadow of the trees. They smoked their long pipes and drank out of their little mugs of beer, and nodded their heads to the music.

He believed in fairies—not in the conventional fairies of the books, for he had never heard of them—but in the fairies from Anna's village in the mountains. Anna was married now and had a rickety, heavy-headed baby which she loved. She was softer and sadder-eyed than ever. On Fridays and Tuesdays she came in to help Frau Felde clean, and when she was eating her lunch of dry bread and coffee she told Helmut about her home and about the fairies. It appeared that they were a queer people, not friendly—not unfriendly. They treated human beings like oafish intruders—more stupid than wicked—whom one teased, or helped, or punished according to their merit. To the really ill-intentioned they could be exceedingly nasty. For instance, there was old Hänsel, who had deliberately planted a potato patch on their favourite ballroom. His potatoes did not flourish, you may be sure, and his pigs died one after another, and finally old Hänsel himself. And every night they dance on his grave so that he can't sleep.

Helmut looked forward to Tuesdays and Fridays, and most of all to Saturdays. On Saturday when it was fine they all five—Heini and Schnäützchen included—took the tram to the Durlacher Turm, which was a Roman watch-tower on a hill overlooking the

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Rhine, and climbing up by a minute funicular train wandered through the forests and over the fields to an inn where there was coffee and *Apfelkuchen*, and sometimes new wine tasting sweet and strong of the grape. An old stork, whose wing had been injured in babyhood, kept guard in the courtyard, standing on one miraculously thin leg and "klappering" with his beak to show his disapproval of little boys like Helmut.

One special Saturday in spring they went out into the woods to gather lilies of the valley. The air sparkled as though the sun had given it a special polishing after the long winter, and the fruit trees lay white as snow on the hills. But one tree bore no blossoms. It stood bleak and grey among its fellows, holding out its gaunt arms pitifully.

"The poor tree is dead," said Helmut's mother.

He stood looking up into the branches, his arms full of the green-sheathed spoils.

"Do trees die," he asked, "and flowers?"

The Herr Amtschreiber pointed with his stick.

"Someone has torn off the bark and injured the trunk. Look where the sap has run out."

"What is sap?"

"It is like our blood." He took a lily of the valley and showed the pale greenish moisture where the stem had been snapped. "You see, it's the same thing, its life is running away. It's been torn in half, as it were. Of course we can keep it fresh in water for a day or days, but it's dying—one might say dead."

"I killed it," said Helmut slowly.

They were not looking at him.

"Think how pretty they will be in the big vase," said Frau Felde. "That is what they were made for."

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They walked on. Helmut lingered behind. He was whiter than the apple tree and shivering as though with cold. He knelt down and dug in the soft earth, Schnäützchen, with dim memories of rabbit-hunts, helping feebly. In the hole Helmut laid his flowers and covered them with leaves.

"I didn't know," he said. "I didn't know you were alive like me. I won't hurt any of you again ever——"

He said his little evening hymn over them. It began: "I am very little but my heart is pure and belongs to Jesus and Jesus alone." He did not know quite what it meant but it was all he could think of. Fritz Schnäützchen sat by and blinked wisely and Heini lay on his back and smiled up at the sun.

Helmut did not gather any more flowers. And there was no *Apfelkuchen* for him that day either. He came back huddled in the corner of the tram, in disgrace and crying softly. He fell asleep at last, worn out with grief, and the Herr Amtschreiber had to carry him home in his arms.

"He must learn to obey," the Herr Amtschreiber panted. "Whatever else he learns he must learn that."

Frau Felde looked at the fair round head.

"He is so young," she said pleadingly; and then, as though she were ashamed: "Yes, it is better for him that he should learn now."

IV

There had been other Christmases, but they had come suddenly, as it were, bursting into view like sky-rockets—and such eternities had passed before another came along that Helmut had almost forgotten

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about them. But he felt this one coming. He recognised the signs and remembered the thrill in the air which grew stronger and more exciting every day. There was the advent of marzipan animals in the windows of the Conditoreis, fir trees began to cluster outside the flower shops, people went about carrying parcels and talking mysteriously. On Sunday all the shops were open, and peasants in bullock wagons and wearing their best broadcloth came pouring in, always in greater numbers. They moved about slowly and with dignity, and refused to make up their minds and were very suspicious of the assistant, who, in the end, sold them whatever she most wanted to get rid of.

Copper Sunday! Silver Sunday! Golden Sunday!

If the other Christmases had been like sky-rockets this one was like the slow, splendid rising of a winter sun.

Christmas Eve! Pandemonium in the shops. Always somebody who had forgotten something. A wild rushing hither and thither. Over-laden postmen appearing at all sorts of unorthodox hours. An absurd excitement on the most soured elderly countenances. A whole town feverishly doing and thinking the same things.

In the Feldes' flat the dining-room had become a place of mystery, closed to all but the high priests. The double doors were locked and the keyhole pasted over. Helmut and Heini and Schnäützchen sat close together on a chair in the passage, and stared in awe-struck longing. Even if the doors hadn't been locked they would not have dared look in. It was a sort of glorious Bluebeard's chamber.

At last twilight added its mystery to the growing

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tension. Frau Felde changed into her best plaid silk blouse, the Herr Amtschreiber arrived from the office with the Herr Geheimrat and his long, thin wife and their seven-year-old son Kurt close on his heels. (They were just looking in before their own festivities began, they said.) Then came Tante Louise, the post-office official's widow, and two elderly female cousins with their husbands, who were going to stay all the time. But the real *pièce de resistance* was, of course, the Geheimrat.

Kurt and Helmut sat together in the hall. They did not speak to one another. Kurt despised Helmut, and Helmut hated Kurt, if it was only for the way he looked at Heini, and they were both scowling when a bell tinkled and the folding doors were flung wide.

Helmut rushed in with Schnäützchen barking quite youthfully at his heels. Kurt followed deliberately. It wasn't his tree, and anyhow he didn't think much of it. It stood in the corner and hardly touched the ceiling, and there was no snow on it, and the shiny coloured balls were few and far between. But to Helmut it was the biggest and finest tree he had ever seen. The dark branches shone with candles and arched themselves under their many strange-shaped burdens, and there was the sweetest smell of burning wood.

Frau Felde sat at the piano and her hard work-worn fingers touched the keys softly, and they all stood still and looked at the fir tree whilst they sang :

" O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum—
Wie grün sind deine Blätter——"

When it was over Helmut advanced shyly towards his parcels. And first of all he took down Schnäütz-

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chen's bone, all tied up in ribbon, and Schnäützchen tried to beg, and finally carried off his Christmas present in triumph and hid himself under the table as though he were afraid of encountering an envious enemy.

Everyone laughed except Kurt, who looked bored and scornful.

And there were sweets—sweets everywhere. Helmut's cheeks bulged with sweets so that his kiss of gratitude was no unmixed blessing. The floor was strewn with paper from the recklessly opened parcels. A toy cart, an engine, an indiarubber ball, a pair of socks knitted by Tante Louise, which Helmut didn't care for at all. The finest parcel came last of all. The Geheimrat, looking bigger and more important than ever, helped him to undo the wrappings. Something glittered, and then as the last piece of tissue paper fell away a complete Cuirassier's uniform, breast-plate, sword and trappings, shone brazenly in the soft candle-light.

There was an "Oh!" of astonishment and admiration subtly directed at the Geheimrat, who stroked his black moustache and chuckled.

"Now we are going to make a real man of you, Helmut!"

Helmut did not answer. He was quite still whilst they buckled on his uniform. A strange feeling came over him. His splendour dazzled him—and yet tears were not far off. He caught a glimpse of somebody in the Venetian glass, and suddenly he was frightened. He did not recognise the small, stiff figure in the glittering breast-plate or the set face under the shadow of the helmet. It was as though a witch—one of Anna's wicked old witches—had waved her wand and changed him.

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"Come—out with your sword—present arms—head up, my boy——"

Mechanically he dragged the toy weapon from its scabbard, but he did not know what to do with it. How did one present arms? The Geheimrat towered over him. His dark, puffy face came closer and closer. It was laughing, and yet in its gross proximity hideous and evil. Helmut shrank back. Everybody was laughing at him—watching and smiling stiffly. He was lost among all these faces. He sought his mother, but her eyes were hard. It was as though she knew he was going to cry—and threatened him.

The Geheimrätin's voice sounded shrill with mockery.

"Oh, what a silly baby! Kurt can salute like a real soldier—Kurt, show Helmut."

"Wait!" said the Geheimrat. He had seen the tear rolling down the flushed cheek. He still laughed, but a dull anger stirred in him. He was in a holiday mood. He condescended to throw off his dignity and play like an ordinary person, and it insulted him that this child should cry. It made him ridiculous in the eyes of all these watchers—these poor, feckless relations, who had never done anything but fail all their lives. And the Geheimrat had never failed. He laughed more loudly. "Just wait—Helmut can't drill yet—but he can fight, I wager, like a lion." And suddenly he caught up Heini by one of the outstretched arms—gingerly—and dropped him on a vacant chair by the stove. "Now, then, my young soldier, that's what we're going to fight for. You're a German and I'm a beastly Englishman coming to take your precious treasure from you. Now, look out—I'm coming——"

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He seized one of the best cushions and holding it like a shield advanced threateningly. Everyone laughed and clapped their hands. How charming of the Geheimrat! How wonderful he was with children—the life of the party. And their whispered flattery came to the big man's ears. He capered terrifyingly.

"Come on, my fine fellow—*en garde!*"

For a minute Helmut stood as one paralysed, and then something woke in him—something new, never before experienced. It was like the rush of a great wind through his shaken soul. Imagination caught fire and flamed up in anger and terror. Heini in danger! Heini in danger! And the great black figure loomed up nearer. In sheerest panic he struck out wildly—with all his strength.

The point of the sword caught the Geheimrat on the wrist. He laughed again, but the blow had hurt. "Ah, you would, would you! Wait, my cockerel."

He made a grasp at Heini lying against the back of the chair and smiling serenely upon them all. The red clutching hand filled Helmut's vision. He flew at it like a mad thing—screaming—frenzied with fear and rage. He hurled himself against his aggressor, beating him with his clenched fists, tearing at him.

"Leave Heini alone—don't you touch my Heini."

And suddenly his sharp white teeth bit on the red hand.

The Geheimrat did not laugh now. He shook the child off as though he had been a rat. Deliberately, terribly, he lifted the rag-doll and opened the slot of the glowing stove. Just for an instant Heini stood out in shadow against the light, then vanished—head

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foremost, arms and legs outstretched—friendly and grinning to the end.

"I think I score," said the Geheimrat, smiling and pulling at his disordered cuffs.

They all laughed again.

But Helmut did not move. He was staring stupidly, his helmet over one ear, his small face livid and contorted. And then suddenly he dropped where he stood.

Someone ran to him. Someone picked him up. He heard the Geheimrat's voice booming from a long way off.

"Over excitement—too many sweets—a rag-doll like that for a boy—idiotic—too soft—must make a man of him, my dear Felde—make a man of him."

And then all was dark.

It was all dark for a long time—dark and very still. He lay quiet, thinking about his head which ached so and his eyes which burnt as though he had been crying. He knew that he was in bed, but he did not remember how he got there or what had happened. He wondered if Christmas Eve were to-morrow—or next week. He wanted it so, and it had such a tiresome way of always being next week.

He felt alone and frightened.

He pushed his feet down gingerly. There was Schnäützchen sure enough curled up at the foot of the bed and snoring softly. The sound comforted him. He put his arm outside the bedclothes and groped about for the chain at his side where Heini slept at night. Sometimes—as a great treat—usually after a bad dream, Heini was taken in and reassured and cuddled till they both went to sleep in each other's arms.

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But there was no chair. Where the chair had been there was just emptiness.

And suddenly his heart began to beat, so that it seemed it would burst in his breast.

"Heini—oh, Heini!"

Heini was dead. Heini had been killed. Heini would never come again. No, that wasn't true, it wasn't possible. Heini had always been there—Heini had always known everything—understood everything. It couldn't be that he would never see him again—never hold him in his arms—never tell him secrets. It was one of the bad dreams. In a minute his hand would find the chair and Heini's podgy little body, and they would be locked together.

"Heini—Heini——"

Like a coloured cinematograph picture he saw the red gaping mouth of the stove and Heini's shadow—spread-eagle fashion, sliding into the depths.

Once he had burnt his finger. It had hurt unforgettably. And Heini had been burnt like that—all over—till he was dead. And he, his friend, had stood by and seen it done. He hadn't stopped it. He hadn't even killed the murderer——

"Heini!"

Still he couldn't believe. He hurled himself against the truth, just as he had hurled himself against the Geheimrat, beating at it with clenched, impotent fists. He twisted about in convulsive, physical anguish.

"Heini—oh, Heini—come back."

Then things happened like that, and there were things that never could come back—that God Himself couldn't mend? Heini had been good. He had never been unkind or untruthful. But it wasn't enough to

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be good. People told you lies. You had to be strong, too—strong as the Geheimrat—stronger——

Then God paid attention to what you said.

He sat up violently. He did not know what he had heard. It was not so dark any more. A pale starlight came through the slits in the shutters, and he could just see the dim shapes of the furniture. The chair where Heini had slept stood against the wall. Heini was not there—but there was something else—a shimmering ghostly body—squat and upright—with a silver head.

He knew what it was. The knowledge made him more afraid. It drove the sweat out on his face. He could not move his eyes. The thing fascinated him evilly. There was the sword leaning against the chair. He had worn it. If he had been strong enough he could have driven it into the Geheimrat's heart. He could have saved Heini.

One had to be strong.

The light was brightening. It flashed on the silver headpiece—on the round shining belly. They moved. Yes, he saw them move. Suddenly Schnäützchen's heavy breathing stopped. He sat up—growling—his pricked ears silhouetted against the light. A real body inside the breast-plate reared itself up on black invisible legs. It grew taller—monstrous. There was a head under the helmet. The face lay in deep shadow—but it was there—and he knew whose face it was. It came nearer and nearer. There was something grotesque about it. It waddled. One could have laughed. It grinned at Helmut, its eyes hollow, its teeth shining under the black moustache. The sword clanked at its side.

"Come—we must make a man of you—a man of you."

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Schnäützchen crept up the bed into his master's arms. Convulsively Helmut clung to him, shielding him, his teeth clenched, the hair rising on his head.

"No, you shan't—you shan't."

Nearer it came. It bent over him. It was quite close when in an instant it changed. The moustache vanished. It was his own face—as he had seen it in the glass—twisted, livid, frightful.

And then he screamed—screamed, so that the night rang with his mortal terror.

CHAPTER III

I

"He is so young," said Frau Felde.

She sat very stiff and upright in her chair, her plump figure tight-cased in the cheap coat, her gloved hands clasped over her bag. "He is so young," she said. There was no expression on her face. It remained stolid and almost hard. Yet they turned on her as though her voice irritated them. Only the Herr Amtschreiber did not look at her, but sat staring between his knees at the carpet.

The Frau Geheimrätin laughed.

"How sentimental you are, Clara! Kurt has been at school for a whole year, he is already in the Quinta. The sooner a boy goes into harness the better."

"We can't have a fool in the family," the Geheimrat added. He stood very big and black against the window, seeming to blot out the light. His tone said: "Another fool," and the Herr Amtschreiber wilted and shrank deeper into his ill-fitting overcoat. "As I have told you, I am willing to do all I can for Helmut. I will give him a start in life in any reasonable profession. But there must be some order and discipline in his education. If I am to have anything to do with him it must be on my terms. He is already inclined to a foolish dreaminess and softness. We don't want to encourage the type. We've had enough of it in the past. We want men with iron brains and iron fists. Helmut may have

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brains—I don't know. He seems to me rather slow. The more reason why he should begin his proper school career at once. In any other case I should feel obliged to refuse any responsibility."

Frau Felde did not answer. A faint flush had risen to her cheeks. The Herr Amtschreiber peered over his spectacles.

"You are quite right—quite right, of course. Helmut must go to the Gymnasium at once." He cleared his throat humbly. "Absolutely right," he mumbled.

The Geheimrat smiled and stroked his sweeping black moustache.

"I think I am—I really think I am."

"Of course you are," his wife ejaculated almost angrily.

"He is so young," Frau Felde repeated. But it was in a whisper. It seemed to come against her will, and her lips closed themselves into a tight line, so that they should not disobey again.

The Geheimrätin yawned openly.

"And now, for heaven's sake, let us talk of something else," she said.

II

"Good morning, boys!"

"Good morning, Herr Oberlehrer!"

There was a sound like the sudden rising of a wind.

Through the open window Helmut could see the high stone wall and the green tops of the trees. One tree grew quite near to the wall. Its branches, delicately clad with soft half-open buds, hung right over into the courtyard. They had a shy yet mocking air of deliberate intrusion. It was as though they said:

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"What a dull place! Let us see what we can do for it."

Suddenly something brown and flashing appeared among them. It flashed and then sat still--so still that it seemed that it must have been there always--its fuzzy tail curled up in a mark of interrogation, its bright eye alert for the answer. A light breeze ruffled its furry coat, and set the shadow of the branches dancing over the wall.

Helmut held his breath. He was afraid to move. He had never seen one so close--so still.

"You there--what's your name?"

A voice fell like a dull thud somewhere in the distance. The squirrel blinked, flashed again and was gone. Evidently it did not like the voice--and no wonder. But perhaps if one was very still it would come again.

"Are you deaf, my young gentleman, or is it the custom in your part of the world not to answer when you are spoken to?"

Helmut turned slowly. Staring so fixedly into the bright morning light had dazed him. But he knew something had changed. There was a man seated at the high desk against the wall. All the boys were on their feet. He could not see properly yet, their faces were blank.

"Take your time, my friend. I am entirely at your disposal. Pray do not disturb yourself in any way."

The voice rasped. Someone tittered, and there was a little sputter of laughter all over the room like the crackling of a damp squib. The man at the desk leant forward, his chin resting on one hand. Helmut could see him clearly now. He was narrow-faced and wore a fair moustache, which showed his straight,

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tight mouth. His eyes were deep set and brown and lustreless. They had the glazed look of an angry animal.

"When you feel disposed will you be so gracious as to stand up, my unknown young friend?" he asked.

Helmut stood up at last, but painfully, as though his limbs had turned to lead. They were all looking at him, their round faces full of suppressed, malicious merriment. A minute before he had just been one of them, and now he was alone—in the midst of a world of eyes.

"What is your name?"

"Helmut."

His own voice sounded strange and unfamiliar.

"I see—you are the only Helmut in the world. You do not need to distinguish yourself like other mortals. Come, your other name, sir!"

"Helmut Felde!"

"Good. Our acquaintanceship progresses." The lean, black body inclined itself satirically. "Names do not seem to come easily to you, however. Do you happen to know where you are living?"

The numbness seemed to be creeping up into his brain.

"Louisenstrasse 51, on the fourth floor——"

The laughter burbled afresh. The blood mounted to the boy's fair hair. His eyes fixed themselves on the man's mouth—twisted into a bitter smile.

"That is most interesting. You have here, boys, a case of the lesser being more than the greater. Karlstadt is evidently not so important as the Louisenstrasse—let alone the fourth storey at number 51. But perhaps you know the name of your country——"

"Baden," came the low, stifled answer.

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"Ah!—ah!—Germany doesn't count. And who governs you, pray?"

"The Grand Du—the Emperor."

"Emperor who?"

There was a silence. His lips moved. A mist swam before him. For a moment everything was blotted out by a mad terror. His limbs had not been so heavy he would have sprung out of the window—run home—anywhere from that rising gale of laughter—from those dead eyes—from that cruel mouth.

"Emperor who?"

He was lost. It had always been just "the Emperor."

"I don't know."

Suddenly it was quiet. Nobody laughed any more. They were watching the man seated at the desk. There was a look of horror—smug, childishly feigned—on the round faces. They waited as for something at once terrible and delicious.

"It gives me pleasure, Herr Helmut Felde, to find that there is something left for me to teach you." The voice unsheathed itself. "You are a fool—a half-wit. I do not tolerate half-wits in my class. Understand that. If the dear God shapes them without brains I reshape them. I shall reshape you—at any cost. Now sit down. I am going to begin."

Helmut slipped back into his seat. His desk towered over him, but it was not big enough to hide him. There was nothing in the world big enough to hide him. And yet he was so small—so lost.

"Von Prütwitz, begin line forty-two to line sixty-two," the voice commanded dispassionately.

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III

The bell clanged. They began to troop out of the classroom, two by two, in order and without noise. Helmut came last of all. He was giddy and breathless, as though he had been beaten physically, and as he passed under the dull, all-seeing eyes he stumbled. The eyes made note of the stumble. They wrote it down where it would not be forgotten.

"Frightened? Good. We will frighten the fright out of you."

The playground was stone-paved and grey. Except for the one inquisitive tree and the forest green that shone distantly through the bars of the iron gates there was no touch of colour. Even the sunlight had the wan pallor of captivity.

A man stood in the middle of the square and swung a handbell. He did it negligently, rather contemptuously. Nobody seemed to notice him. He was huge and broad-shouldered, unlike any of the other masters. For one thing he was not dressed like them. A velvet jacket and a flowing tie took the place of the rigid, tightly-buttoned frock-coat, and his brown beard and leonine head of hair added to his strangeness. Altogether there was something laughable and yet free about him, like a scarecrow fluttering its ragged independence among a flock of orderly young sheep.

Helmut kept close to the schoolhouse wall. He dared not look at anyone. He was still trying to hide, but out here it was more than ever impossible. His class-mates eddied about him. They peered into his face, at first inquisitively, and then as they felt his shrinking terror, with a waking, surging love of

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torment. But as yet it was inarticulate. Kurt Köhler, standing square and dominating inside the circle, gave them their lead.

"You did make a fool of yourself, I must say. A pretty thing for me to have—a half-wit—for a cousin."

"A half-wit! A half-wit!"

They pounced on the cry like a pack of hounds.

"Who's the German Emperor?"

"He doesn't know!"

"What's Germany?"

"He doesn't know!"

"A half-wit!"

They made a circle round him. Sharpening their first fingers at him with their ancient gesture of mockery, they began to dance.

"Ätch! Ätch! Ätch! He doesn't know! He doesn't know!"

The monotonous inflection of their shrill young voices fell like a lash, striking again and again on the same raw, aching wound. But he held out. Somewhere in the depths of him he found a patience that could endure pain. It was Kurt who hurt too much. Kurt did not dance with the rest. He stood and stared down at Helmut, his arms folded, his pale, heavy-lidded eyes full of gratified malice. He had looked like that when Heini had been thrown into the fire. He looked like the Geheimrat.

Helmut's scattered senses focused on him. They sprang to recollection, and the old, unforgotten wrong leaped up from his hiding-place. He began to tremble. And his own trembling terrified him. It was the first whisper of a storm that he could not stand against. For even then he knew dimly of something that slumbered under his timidity and

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patience—something incalculable and uncalculating—a masterless frenzy.

“Please — please, Kurt, don’t tease me,” he pleaded.

“Ätch! Ätch! Ätch! He doesn’t know——”

“You leave me alone, Kurt.”

“I’m not speaking to you. I’m not looking at you, am I? I wouldn’t touch you—beastly little half-wit!”

The storm had him between its teeth and shook him off his feet. Like a young bull, head down, he charged into the jeering figure, which went over before him with the sudden completeness of a ninepin. The triumph was short-lived. The pack hurled itself upon the conqueror. Blows and kicks rained upon him. He felt none of them. He went Berserk, tearing, screaming, struggling, until suddenly the whirlwind dropped him and he stood alone, panting and wild-eyed in the midst of a sullen silence.

“You young demons! Have you no sense of decency? One against twenty! Pfui! Clear off—the lot of you—to your business!”

They slunk away like puppies whipped off an illegitimate bone, and the big man and the little boy remained alone, looking at one another. Helmut’s rage had left him. He still trembled, but now it was with cold and shame and wretchedness.

“What is your name, Kleine?”

“Helmut—Helmet Felde, Herr Lehrer.”

“Bless you—I’m not a Herr Lehrer, God be praised. I’m Herr Heilig. I’m usher and ring the bell and see that you don’t behave too much like little boys. Why did you fly at young Köhler like that?”

“He—he made fun of me.”

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"Well, you are rather a comical little object. But what was the real cause?"

"I said—I told the Herr Lehrer—I didn't know the Emperor's name."

A muffled roar came from behind the tawny beard. The giant shook with laughter.

"And they found that funny? No, my son, I don't believe it. They weren't amused. They writhed. It was hysterics following on a severe nervous shock. Helmut Felde, you're not going to add to all your other sins by crying, are you?"

The child looked up into the twinkling, hazel eyes and choked back a sob.

"No—I'm not."

"Fine. I was afraid you might—and that would have been an anti-climax. A young devil like you ought to go to the gallows smiling. There—I won't tease you. I ought to make you drill or do something else you don't want to, but I'll let you off this time. Got a handkerchief?"

Helmut searched wildly round the belt of his overall where that symbol of civilisation was supposed to hang.

"It's gone, Herr Heilig."

"Well, there's mine. Wipe your face with it. Don't you let things get a hold of you, my son. Fight 'em off. If they get too much for you you come along to me. I like you. A fellow of your age who doesn't know the Emperor's name must be something out of the ordinary. Must have a touch of genius."

"Yes, Herr Heilig."

"But don't you get puffed up about it. And for heaven's sake don't boast about it. There's nothing they'll like less in this establishment. If you've got

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any more things you don't know of that nature you keep them for me. Understand? "

"Yes, Herr Heilig."

"Then run along."

Helmut did not run. He went slowly, not knowing quite where to go. His late assailants had fallen into groups and were playing in a bored, desultory fashion, but at least they took no further notice of him. Kurt had vanished altogether. Helmut thought of the squirrel and the shining tree. Its shadow was already occupied, but now his fear of isolation smothered his fear of mockery. Besides, these two boys had taken no part in the attack. The one sat tailor-fashion, his head in his hands, a book between his knees, whilst his companion stood by his side and munched a *Butterbrötchen*, eyeing Helmut dispassionately but not unkindly.

"Hallo! "

"Hallo! "

"Are you the chap that knocked Köhler over? "

"Yes. I—I suppose so."

"You ought to know. What's your name? "

"Felde—Helmut."

"Mine's von Prütwitz. This is Schultz. New, aren't you? "

"Yes."

"Beastly place. You'll hate it."

Helmut drew nearer, like a timid young animal. A faint aftergust of the storm sent the blood to the roots of his fair hair.

"I hate it now," he said slowly. "I hate everyone here. They're cruel—all of them—they laughed—it was unkind—I wouldn't have laughed."

"I expect they did it to please old Sheepshanks. It puts him in a good temper and takes up time."

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Von Prütwitz brushed the crumbs off his overall with a hand that was like a girl's in its shapely whiteness. "I hate it too, of course. We all do. But it's got to be gone through. They make us learn and we've got to learn."

"I don't want to learn," Helmut muttered fiercely.

"I want to do as I like."

The boy considered him thoughtfully.

"You can't do that," he said. "Nobody can. And of course you've got to learn. If you don't you won't get through your Einjährige's exam and then where will you be? Besides, you won't get on—you won't be of any use. You'll be a failure."

Helmut did not answer. A dull, tired feeling came over him. It was as though he had been struggling for a long time with someone who held him tight and repeated the same thing to him over and over again. And now he couldn't struggle any more. He looked wonderingly at the boy standing opposite him. He was not like any of the boys he had played and worked with in the Kindergarten. He was so much older. He talked like a man who knew; who had thought and come to a decision. Even in his bearing there was something composed, settled. And he was good to look at, too—with his small, aquiline features and transparent skin and steel blue eyes that returned Helmut's gaze so calmly.

"What's your father?"

"An official in the Stadtamt."

"Mine was an officer. A captain in the Kolonie Truppen. He was Kuirassier first of all, but he changed over. He wanted to fight. And he was killed out in West Africa chasing Hereros. He would have been a general in time. All of us have been generals."

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"Oh!" said Helmut. He felt that to be an *Amtschreiber* was to be as grey and dull as the courtyard. He almost wished his father had been killed. "I s'ppose you'll be a soldier too?" he asked timidly.

"Of course. I was to have gone into a cadet school, but I wasn't strong enough. They grill you there, I can tell you. But I'm getting on now. In another ten years I shall be an ensign in a line regiment. We're beastly poor, you know. But it doesn't matter. There'll be a war, perhaps, and I'll do something big. Like my grandfather. He was at Gravelotte and led the charge. I am to have his sword." A sudden flush rose up under his fair skin. "If only war doesn't come too soon—before I'm grown up. It's that I'm so afraid of."

There was a real emotion in his voice—a real fear. Helmut thought suddenly—he did not know why—of the Geheimrat and of Heini slipping into the flames.

"I'd hate to kill people," he stammered.

"Or be killed," von Prütwitz laughed. "One doesn't think of it like that," he went on impatiently. "It's the glory—the fighting—one man against another—you or him—and every man you strike down is something done for your King—for your country. You prove what you're made of. You prove you're a man. How can you prove that in a stuffy office?"

The boy Schultz lifted his head.

"I wish to God you wouldn't talk!" he burst out hoarsely. "I can't think with you going on like that. I can't get this into my head. I—I can't fix it. I don't know what'll happen. Oh, for God's sake, shut up!"

He looked about him wildly and his face struck cold, unreasoning fear into Helmut's heart. It was

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old and fat and shapeless. The features lost themselves in white puffy flesh that fell into creases beneath the eyes that were so absurdly, horribly young. They fixed themselves at last on Helmut, but Helmut felt they did not see him. "Oh, for God's sake—how does it go—— '*Die schönen Tagen von Aranjuez sind nun zu ende*——'"

His head went down into his hands again.

Von Prütwitz shrugged his shoulders.

"Poor old Schultz. He's in a bad way. He's afraid they won't give him his remove—and they won't either. He can't stand the grind here. One has to be tough—or—oh, well—time's up, anyhow——"

Herr Heilig stood in the middle of the courtyard and swung his bell. The little groups came together instantly, forming into double file.

"I like him," said Helmut. "He's kind."

"Oh, Heilig?" Von Prütwitz's tone was cold but respectful. "Yes, he's all right. He paints pictures. He just does this to help out. They say he's a social democrat or something mad like that. But he's an artist, so it doesn't matter. Come on, Schultz."

The boy seated on the ground looked up. His lips were still moving soundlessly. He lurched to his feet, holding to his companion's arm. It seemed as though his legs were not strong enough to bear the swollen-looking head.

"'*Die schönen Tagen von Aranjuez*——' Oh, God, how does it go then?"

"We've got to hurry," von Prütwitz retorted. "Never mind old Schiller."

Helmut lingered. He was looking at the iron gates and at the green trees beyond. They lured

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him—tempted him. His heart beat in frantic tumult. He couldn't go back—not into that dull, cold classroom, not to that man who jeered at him, not to these pitiless, staring faces. He didn't want to learn, he wanted to go out into the woods and play with Schnäützchen—and be free. They said one couldn't be free. It wasn't true. He had been free. And freedom was out there—beyond the gates. Only one had to go now—now before they caught you—

A hand touched him and he almost screamed, so real had the shapeless "they" been to his imagination. It was only Schultz. He had come back. His pitiful face was quite close to Helmut's. But the eyes were no longer vague and unseeing.

"No," he said quietly. "It's no good. They're locked. Always. They keep them locked. One can't get out—ever." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I know—I've tried."

The bell rang more urgently. They had to run to get into the school-house in time.

IV

There was no mystery about the door now. You rang a bell and someone upstairs pulled a lever attached to a strong wire and the door opened. The Geheimrat had been quite right about it.

There were no fairies.

Helmut crept up the stairs, lingering on each step. The stairs were dark and in the darkness he was hidden. He cowered away from the thought of light and of faces and people questioning him. Then they would find out that he had made Kurt's nose bleed and that he was a half-wit.

His mother opened the door for him and there

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was Schnäützchen lying on the mat, waiting. But Schnäützchen knew that to-day was different from other days. He did not bark or caper in a gallant travesty of youth. He followed heavily into the dining-room.

"Well, Helmut?" He did not answer, and she took off the bright yellow cap of the lower-fifth and ran her hand with a caress over the close-cropped head. "Why—you're going to be a real man, Helmut."

She helped him to unstrap the square knapsack and to unpack his books. There were ten of them, and he laid them out separately on the table and looked at them. He had got to take everything that was inside those dull covers and squeeze it into his head. And his head ached now—as though it were pressed full to overflowing.

"Well, Helmut, can't you speak?"

And suddenly he turned on her and there was a quivering note of hysteria in his boy's voice.

"And shall I never play again, Mother?"

For a moment they stared at each other. There was an aghast look on the woman's pale, dull face. She turned away as though there were something in his eyes that she could not meet.

"You must be a man, Helmut," she said quietly. "Life isn't a game."

So he knew that he was not to play again, and soon he understood why. There was no time. Life was work. Work from eight o'clock in the morning till five o'clock at night. Work at home, trying to placate the contemptuous mocking of those lightless brown eyes. Work under the bedclothes when the light was out, piecing together tags of half-digested

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knowledge. Piano lessons at the Conservatorium on the one half-holiday. An hour's practice when an hour could be found. On Saturday night preparation for Pastor Kleister's scripture class.

It did not matter that everyone in the town knew that Pastor Kleister believed neither in God nor devil. It did not make the chapter of the Old Testament (to be learnt by heart) one verse the less.

At first he flung himself against the bars. "Why can't I play—why—why?" he asked. But after a little he ceased to question, and in a little while again he forgot that he had ever played.

He was ten when he found out that life wasn't a game.

Fritz Schnäützchen waited patiently for his playmate. But he never came. And Schnäützchen grew very old.

CHAPTER IV

I

BUT there was a feast day. On that day in the term the school closed. One did not play, it is true, but the grey monotony was broken with light and music. The tension tightened, but now with a kind of fierce joyousness. It was as though one had come suddenly quite near to the answer to all one's questioning and that it was a glowing, fiery answer.

The evening before, the Herr Oberlehrer gave them an address. Helmut had never seen him like that before. There was a white heat about him—an inward illumination of the whole man which shone through the dull brown eyes and gave them splendid life.

"To-morrow is a day on which you must reconsider yourselves, your position, your duty. You must fix in your mind the knowledge of the immense and glorious whole to which you belong—to which you must give everything—if need be your life. Thereafter you will be better able to understand your task—to bend yourselves to it with a greater will——"

And Helmut knew then that there was a bond between him and the man whom he hated which could never be broken.

II

There were flags out in the Kaiserstrasse, the yellow and red of Baden, the red, white and black

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of the Empire. The streets sparkled with bright colours. The officers wore their gala uniforms—plumed helmets, short jackets with gold-braided collars, shining high boots. The thrilling whisper of spurs and sabres played a soft accompaniment to the brazen chorus of the bands as they came at the head of their regiments, pouring into the town like shining rivers into a lake.

Helmut and Schultz and von Prütwitz met outside the latter's home, a high, violently ornate *Etagenhaus* in the Karlstrasse, and then ran as fast as their legs would carry them. They were very late. Schultz had arrived ten minutes after time. He had had a bad night, he said, and his head hurt.

"It's that beastly fourth prop I can't get clear," he panted. "I keep on doing it over again and again—in my mind."

The Schlossplatz was black with crowd when they arrived. The people wedged in between the houses and the wall of troops could not see their hands, and at first it seemed a hopeless business. Then von Prütwitz recognised a brother-officer as he called him, a merry-faced youth who laughed and escorted them across the road to a perfect vantage point between two immense Grenadiers. Just behind them stood Herr Heilig, more scarecrow-ish than ever, his soft hat at a rakish angle, his hands jammed in the pockets of his velvet coat.

They lifted their yellow caps solemnly and nodded back to them, smiling.

"Good morning, children—come to see the show?"

"Jawohl, Herr Heilig!" they answered in chorus.

But there was something about Herr Heilig that they did not understand.

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It was quite still now. The bands were silent, the troops in their places. Everywhere you looked you saw the flash of steel. In front of the Schloss stood the Commandant-General of the district. You picked him out from the midst of a glittering staff by the red Ranks of his gait overcoat.

The hum deepened. It was as though everyone in that vast concourse held their breath. Then a deep, hoarse voice broke upon the stillness:

"Seine Kaiserliche Majestät—er lebe hoch!"

From ten thousand men's throats came the answer

"Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!"

The cheer fell short and hard like a great

mass of bands clashed out together

"*Hoch dir, Siegenkranz—*"

The Grenadier regiment swung out of its square; then deep they poured past the saluting base, parade step, their officers with lowered swords at the head of each company—they came on like rolling thunder—like a torrent. They were not men, not soldiers. They were one body moving at the behest of one mind—a body elemental and monstrous and human and a mind of a soulless, terrible god.

They shook the earth under their feet.

Helmut clenched his hands. The tears stung his eyes. Shock after shock of strange, delirious excitement, half joy after terror ran through his nerves. He could have screamed, and his body was wet with perspiration. He looked up suddenly, for Herr Heilig had taken a step forward. He was leaning over Helmut, his face red and swollen with a rush of blood. His eyes, staring from under knit brows, dropped almost instantly to answer the boy's gaze, and their hardness broke, letting through the old

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humour. But it had become a trifle wry—a trifle bitter. He shook himself like a big dog.

"The Juggernaut makes us dance, doesn't it, Helmut?" he said. "And one day we shall throw ourselves under the wheels—singing——"

Helmut did not understand. He had never heard of a Juggernaut. At that moment Schultz jogged at his elbow.

"Look at the bayonets, they shine like needles. If one was stuck into a man's body do you think it would hurt? I mean, badly, like my head, or would it kill at once? One could twist it round in the wound, like this, and then——"

He made a gesture. He was strangely, horribly excited.

III

It was over. The great black crowd broke up into particles that meandered peacefully homewards or straggled into the cafés and tempting Conditoreis. The three boys scarcely spoke. Even cakes, piled high with cream, could not rouse them from the queer tiredness which had come over them. They dragged their feet. They could easily have quarrelled. It was as though they had been worked up and up to a crisis and that the crisis had not come. A circle had not been completed. Something had been withheld. They did not know what it was, but the lack of it made them morose and nervous.

At the top of the Karlstrasse they met another cortège. It was led by three students on horseback. They were clad in mediæval costume with ostrich plumed caps, thigh boots and velvet coats. They carried drawn swords and the colours of their order.

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Behind them came a stream of carriages filled with students, and more carriages still, packed with old gentlemen wearing the tricolour ribbon across their breasts and the gay cap of their youth on their grey heads.

Then three more riders bearing other colours, and more carriages.

"The Corps and Burschenschaften hold their Kaiser Komers together to-night," Schultz said. "I was to have gone. My father's an alte Herr of the Friesens. But I can't get my work done——"

"There's my father!" cried Helmut suddenly, "there in the third carriage—now—he's looking."

It was the Herr Amtschreiber right enough. He sat very grave and upright between two old gentlemen, his cap a little over one ear, his coat thrown open to show the ribbon. As he saw the three children standing on the kerb he lifted his cap with a flourish and they lifted theirs respectfully.

Never had the Herr Amtschreiber seemed so bright and clear and definite.

"My father was third Chargierter when he was active," Helmut said breathlessly. "He's got a cut right across the head—from his first Mensur—he showed it to me——"

"Students are all right," von Prütwitz observed dispassionately, "especially if they're in a good corps. Even a Burschenschaft can be pretty decent, I believe. But they go into business or an office afterwards. It's not like being an officer."

The little glow of glory went out.

"Oh no, of course not," said Helmut, sighing.

Schultz gave a queer laugh.

"Do you know, I don't believe I shall be either," he muttered.

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IV

The glory came again that night. Helmut sat with his mother on the raised dais and looked over the huge Fest-Halle. The uniforms of the students who moved hither and thither among the long tables danced before his eyes like the colours of a kaleidoscope. The chink of beer glasses and the hum of voices wove themselves into a haunting symphony which died away when the band struck up and a swinging students' song thundered exuberantly to the rafters.

Helmut joined in too, holding tightly to his song-book.

"Gaudeamus igitur—"

He did not know what it meant. But it made him so happy that he could have cried. He forgot all the lessons that he had left behind him and that he would never, never understand. Everything was lost in fire and colour. He looked up into his mother's face, smiling. Frau Felde, very red and earnest, sang with all her might.

At the cross table at the head of the hall sat the first Chargierter of all the Corps and Burschenschaften, a prince from the reigning house, old generals in full uniform. And there at one of the side tables was the Herr Amtschreiber. He sat among all the young men and drank with them and laughed with them. When he saw Helmut and his mother he waved his cap and lifted his glass.

"Prosit!"

And Frau Felde lifted her glass and drank back and laughed.

"Prosit!"

She too seemed to have grown more vivid, as

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though life in her had suddenly begun to burn strong and clear.

"Silentium!"

And it was so still that Helmut thought he heard his own heart beating. The first Chargierter of the presiding Corps stood up in his place, his drawn sword lying on the table. At first Helmut could not hear what he said, but as his young voice accustomed itself to the vast hall, the words rang out sharp and passionate.

"But it's not the man only we honour. Bound as we are to him by personal oath, by a personal allegiance which has its root in the most splendid hour of our history, we yet know that it is not that alone which holds us, claims our endeavour, our life. It is not the Emperor as man, but the Emperor as Germany who commands us. And who is Germany? He is our father. We are his sons. Each one of us, the least and the greatest, bears the glorious burden of sonship on his shoulders. But the Emperor bears the greatest burden of all: he is the chosen heir. He leads us forward—across the seas to new lands, new victories. When the smouldering envy and hatred of effete peoples bursts into flame he will lead us over them till they are trampled into ashes. We shall carry our banners over the world.

"For that hour we live. We are one people. The old individualism is dead. We no longer live for ourselves, for our families, for our cities or our province—we live for Germany. We have no other life."

He stopped suddenly. There was no sound. "Gentlemen, I call upon you to rub a salamander in honour of our Emperor——"

They rose to their feet like one man.

"Eins!"

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The glasses were raised high and emptied to the dregs.

"Zwei!"

They were lowered swiftly.

"Eins, zwei, drei!"

The glasses rumbled on the table with the noise of thunder.

The band caught up on the last crash.

"Germany—Germany before all!"

And Helmut sang as though his life depended on their hearing his shrill, young voice. His heart grew big and hot within him. He saw the Herr Amtschreiber, and that he was singing, too, holding himself straight and fine like a soldier.

"Even Prütwitz would know we were all right if he could see us now," Helmut thought.

And presently the Herr Amtschreiber came up on to the platform. He carried little bunches of flowers—one for every lady invited by his *Verbindung*. The best of all he kept for the Geheimrätin. He made her a deep bow, with his hand on his heart, and everyone laughed. They had never seen him so gallant—so daring.

For a moment he stood at Helmut's side, blinking over his glasses.

"That was beautiful—beautiful, wasn't it?" he said softly. "In such a moment one understands why one is alive."

V

It was not like sleep. There was no sweet sinking into forgetfulness. He could not close his eyes, try as he would. He could not turn them away. The pageant went on and on—cavalry and foot, generals on horseback, brave banners and tossing plumes,

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rivers of steel—brazen music, thunder of voices—all passing from darkness into light and into darkness again.

He kept on saying :

"I'm so tired. Can't I go to sleep ever ? "

And his father answered :

"Now we understand why we are alive, little Helmut."

In reality Helmut was fast asleep. He did not hear Frau Felde open the front door. He did not hear the Herr Amtschreiber drag his feet along the passage. And the Herr Amtschreiber was not trying to move quietly. He did not care who heard him. He cared neither for God nor man. His battered student's cap was at the back of his head, faded bunches of flowers were in his button-hole—sticking out of his pockets. He went shuffling along into the sitting-room, singing under his breath, leaving a trail of smoke and wine fumes behind him.

"You are mad, my child——

You must go to Berlin.

That's where the lunatics come from "

sang the Herr Amtschreiber.

Frau Felde closed the door in an agony of fear.

"Oh, Hermann—if anyone heard you—if anyone saw you——"

He laughed and flung up his arms.

"Who cares? I—I've had a g-good time. Jolly f-fellows—all sorts of jolly fellows—no nonsense about them, said I was a jolly fine fellow, too, a—a real German—we're to wipe up the world between us—French and English and Russian—dirty monkeys the lot of them—just wipe them up—I-like that——"

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The little Herr Amtschreiber made a sweeping gesture that nearly carried him off his feet.

"Oh, Hermann—for God's sake——"

"Well—w-what's the matter? What you crying for? I'm—drunk. Of course I'm drunk. W-what do you think I'm drunk for? I'm drunk to be free—to do what I like. I'd push in my Herr Bureau-Chef's ugly face if he was here—I'd spit in his eye. That's what I'm drunk for—not so much of this damn fear of everything——"

"We Germans fear G-God and nothing else—we're supermen—blond beasts—and we can't smack a man's face——"

The Herr Amtschreiber lurched and then was sick, pitifully, helplessly sick.

She said nothing. She helped him into his chair before the fire and fetched hot water and bathed his hands and face and the soiled waistcoat. He was quiet now—drowsy as an exhausted child. He had lost his glasses, and his round, short-sighted blue eyes blinked wistfully at her.

"You—you won't let me be late for the office, Clärchen?"

"No—of course not. It would never do."

He fell asleep instantly.

She sat beside him, her hand on his, upright, expressionless, waiting for the grey morning.

CHAPTER V.

I

IT rained so that the black mourning pines that shadowed the Gasthaus zur Hundseck on three sides were just a memory. The drenching mist rolled between, white and soundless, muffling the rare footstep, the very drip of the water-laden branches to an intangible whisper. Sometimes it lightened, as though behind it someone were moving about with a lantern, searching for shelter, then darkened again hopelessly.

A little group of people stood in the porch and drank their after-lunch coffee and were facetiously pessimistic after the manner of their race.

"This is nothing to what it can do," one of the men declared, "and moreover it can go on doing it for days and nights together."

"To think we left England for this!" a feminine voice answered. "An English drizzle is hope compared with it."

"Do you believe that out over there are valleys and mountains and more mountains—right to the end of the world?"

"No, I don't. I believe there is an abyss and if I took three steps forward I should fall straight into it."

"How deadly quiet—and boring. What on earth are we to do with ourselves?"

Someone yawned.

"Might hire a conveyance and run down to Baden-Baden and make a night of it."

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"It won't be much of a run up—three hours' tug."

"Who cares? Better than sitting here. I'm damp to the skin already."

"What's that? Something's coming—look—over there?"

They laughed at the mock excitement, but were bored enough to turn in the direction which the girl indicated. Someone was actually coming—more than just "someone." The subdued shuffling of many feet reached them long before the mist broke into shadows that came pouring in ghostly procession to the doors of the Gasthaus.

"What on earth are they? Gnomes? There are gnomes in the Black Forest. Cooks' swore there were."

"Moving toadstools."

"Oh, hush! We mustn't laugh. If they're gnomes it might annoy them."

A waiter, collecting coffee-cups, offered obsequious explanation.

"The three lower classes from the Karlstadt Gymnasium, on their yearly holiday," he said.

"Schoolboys? And so solemn? And those funny caps——"

"Only Germans could think of caps like that."

"Can you imagine English boys carrying umbrellas?"

The under-fifth gazed stolidly at the foreigners. Their round, young faces were expressionless, and yet their expressionlessness conveyed a dull dislike and distrust. Someone hidden in the mist shouted an order and the umbrellas were lowered and stacked like rifles. The children stood motionless and silent in double file.

"Good Lord—young Germany, and no mistake!"

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"They're not children. They can't be. They're little old men."

The girl who had first seen the new arrivals pressed her companion's arm.

"Hush! They may understand. They look so wise, as though they knew everything—and—and so pathetic."

The Herr Oberlehrer Schäfer loomed out of the mist with Herr Heilig at his heels. His face was set and dark, and he pushed through the little knot of strangers insolently, as though he had not seen them. But he had heard them. He heard a man's voice remark behind him:

"Well, they don't teach manners at that school, anyhow."

"Of course not. They'd think it effeminate."

The Herr Oberlehrer turned to his companion.

"Damned English pigs! What do they want here? Why do they come? They contaminate our forests as they contaminate our national life. They brought their filthy vices to Baden-Baden. Isn't that enough? Have we got to put up with their infernal, insolent patronage and laughter even in our holy of holies!"

He spoke loudly. His rasping voice reached the silent children who stood stiffly at the long tables, awaiting their orders. Heilig shook the rain off his long Loden overcoat.

"The English are a critical race," he observed coolly, "and they have an immense sense of humour. They can't help seeing the comic in everything."

"You call that a sense of humour? To laugh at sacred things? The English would laugh at Christ on the crucifix. Or perhaps you would excuse that?"

"Certainly not. In the meantime, they have only

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laughed at us. And perhaps we are funny. I often think so myself."

"A German who makes a jest of his country is a traitor."

Heilig rubbed his untidy beard and twinkled good-humouredly.

"Hadn't we better begin, Herr Oberlehrer? The coffee will be getting cold."

His superior made no answer. He sat down with a peremptory gesture which opened forty neat little parcels and set forty hungry mouths to work. The children ate almost in silence, with rare gusts of whisperings and irrepressible boyish scufflings. And after each gust they threw sidelong glances at the two men at the head of the table. They looked at the Herr Oberlehrer with fear, but at Herr Heilig with distrust, with unchildish disapproval. He was a traitor. The Oberlehrer had said as much. A traitor—a man who could laugh at sacred things—at Germany.

They could hear the English voices in the corridor outside—calling instructions, laughing. The place might have belonged to them. The Herr Oberlehrer sat back, his fists clenched on the table.

"Come, children, we will give these English a song before we go—a German song—we will show them that German boys aren't afraid of rain—or of them—or of anything on earth."

"Jawohl, Herr Oberlehrer!" they shouted.

They sang the "Wacht am Rhein," and "Deutschland—Deutschland über alles." Their eyes fixed on the man's dark and bitter face, they sang shrilly, truculently. The songs of defence and love rang with aggression and hate. It was as though they drew venom from some secret source.

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The Oberlehrer conducted with his clenched fist.

"How jolly it sounds," the English girl said as she stepped into the closed carriage. "The Germans are so musical."

Five minutes later, just as the Baden-Baden expedition started on its way, the under-fifth came pouring out of the Gasthaus. Discipline had been relaxed. They straggled across the road, they eddied uncertainly round the slowly moving carriage, peering in at the windows.

Suddenly Kurt Köhler jabbed his umbrella savagely at the girl seated in the far corner. The man next her laughed and, catching hold of the umbrella-point, gave the aggressor a playful poke which sent him tumbling back from the step into the silent, unlaughing crowd.

"Mischievous young devil!"

"Well, I'm glad there is a bit of fun in them!" the girl said. "Did you see that boy standing on the bank—such a pretty little fellow—and so serious. Do you think they ever laugh?"

"Perhaps it's verboten," her companion suggested. "At any rate, they're allowed to cry."

From the distance came the sound of Kurt Köhler howling dolefully.

II

The three boys had climbed to the highest point of the mountain, where a half-ruined Roman tower kept watch over the Rhine valley. It was still raining. They crept into the shelter of a broken archway and huddled together from the driving mist.

Von Prütwitz commanded their adventure. He always commanded. No one quite understood why

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he accepted the companionship of the two dullest children in the school. It was partly perhaps because they accepted him so simply, so reverently. He was their bright and steadfast star, the one firm rock in their small, tottering universe. And he was not domineering or cruel—only radiantly self-assured. He was not even afraid of the masters.

He was going to be an officer, and compared to him schoolmasters were small fry.

Helmut, who had not eaten all his dinner, divided out the remnants and they munched for a little while in silence. The enveloping mist gave them a thrilling sense of mystery and loneliness. Schultz pointed down into the twisting, wreathing clouds of smoke and his hand trembled.

"Anything—anything might come up out of that!" he whispered.

"Fairies!" said Helmut. "The bad ones——"

"Or the English." Von Prütwitz caught up a broken branch and set it to his shoulder like a rifle. "Let's pretend they're trying to storm our castle. There they come—up the hill. Ah! you see that fine fellow? Bang! There—head-over-heels! Dead as a door-nail!"

"I hate the English," said Helmut solemnly.

Von Prütwitz picked off another assailant.

"So do I, professionally. One can't fight if one doesn't hate. And as we're going to fight them we can't start hating them too soon. But they're rather decent fellows, I believe. My uncle admires them frightfully. It'll be a ripping war if only it doesn't come off before I'm grown up."

"Anyhow, I couldn't help being pleased when they poked Kurt in the chest—he's such a beast. All the masters like him. At home they're always tell-

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ing him how clever and splendid he is. They're ashamed of me."

"Kurt cheats," Schultz muttered. "I've seen him."

Von Prütwitz shrugged his shoulders.

"Everybody knows. The masters know. They think it's rather smart. But it's silly to cheat. It's pretending you know something you don't know. Sooner or later you're bound to be found out, and the later it is the worse it is. Supposing I pretend I know how to aim a gun and always get the calculations from someone else. Then when the war comes I try to blow up an English battery and not our first-line trenches instead. It's idiotic. You've got to *know* to be efficient, or you're no good to anybody."

There was a silence. Schultz sat with his white face between his hands staring down at an ant-heap among the pine-needles. The ceaseless, passionate hurrying of its inmates seemed to exercise a strange fascination over him.

"I never know," he said at last. "I never know anything. I don't know why it is. A thing looks easy enough at first, and then when I try to do it, it sort of slips away. I can't get hold of it, and my head hurts as though it were too full, and the stuff was trying to burst out of my ears."

"And I think I know until I get into class," Helmut said, "and then when Sheepshanks looks at me it—it just goes. Sometimes I wish he would kill me, and then it would be over."

Schultz nodded gravely.

"Yes—then it would be over."

He had discovered a large party of ants at some distance from their ant-heap. They were trying to

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carry a twig several hundred times larger than themselves. Schultz dug a deep trench round them with his forefinger.

"You oughtn't to be frightened," von Prütwitz said, still busy with his invisible Englishmen. "Germans are not afraid of anyone except God—that's what Bismarck said."

"Who is God?"

They were silent again. It was as though the sudden question touched something vital in all three of them. Von Prütwitz let his rifle drop.

"I don't know. I don't believe anyone does. Of course, there's nothing in all that Bible stuff. No one believes in that now—not even old Kleister. He hardly pretends to. He has to stick to his screw like everyone else. He knows it's all a fairy story. He said as much."

"You mean, he doesn't believe in God—or—or in Christ?"

Von Prütwitz lifted his proud young head with a laugh.

"Why, he hates Christ! You can hear it in his voice. He hates all that talk about humility and forgiveness and submission. And he's right too. It's all rot and humbug. We aren't humble—and humility is sickly anyhow—and we forgive just as much or as little as we feel inclined. And submission is cowardly. No man who is a man submits unless he's got to. We despise men who give in. You look round you and you'll see that's true. It's been two thousand years of humbug. And some of us have got to go on pretending because it's an easy way of making a living—like Kleister. But even Kleister only sticks to it by pretending Christ is Siegfried and God Wotan—good old fighting Ger-

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man gods. When he talks of them he warms up. You feel he means something."

"It's no good my praying to Wotan," said Schultz under his breath. "Only the great warriors go to Valhalla."

"Don't you believe in anything, Prütwitz?" Helmut asked shyly.

The boy did not answer for a minute.

"I'm not certain yet. One has to work these things out for oneself or it's no good. I think about it though, and one day I shall make up my mind. Perhaps it's as some people say: God is just everything, what we call life—the trees and animals—the earth—and us. Where we're sitting now, perhaps some German died thousands of years ago. Perhaps this handful of dirt is—is him. When I am buried on a battlefield I shall become dust like that too. Perhaps that's being immortal. So when we are fighting for our country, it's fighting for God—our God."

"Then there are ever so many gods in the world?"

"Our God is the greatest," Prütwitz answered. "We must make him God of gods."

A gust of wind shook the invisible pine trees so that they sighed sadly among themselves. The mist eddied and swayed and suddenly thinned like a worn and tattered shroud. And through the jagged rent they looked down upon a world of valley and mountain lying in a pale flood of sunshine. The valley shone like an emerald snake between the dark mountains that rolled on and on till they met the clouds.

And Heinrich von Prütwitz leapt up and tossed his cap into the air.

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"Long live our dear Lord God!" he shouted.
"Long life to him!"

His shrill boy's voice echoed through the muffled silence. He stood with his arms stretched above his head in exultant salutation.

But his companions huddled closer together.

"I don't think I want to believe in God," Helmut brooded. "It's no good having a God one hates. And God must be a beast. He made people like old Sheepshanks!"

"Cruel people," said Schultz dully. "People who laugh at you so that you want to kill them—hurt them; and ugly, stupid people—like me—who never wanted to be born."

"Perhaps there isn't a God at all," Helmut consoled.

"Then it doesn't matter what happens," Schultz answered. "It doesn't matter what one does—it's just a handful of earth."

"German earth," Prütwitz cried out. "That matters!"

But the vision was already fading. A dense, steamy cloud rolled up over the opposite mountains. It came on irresistibly, menacingly, like a charge of cavalry, its wet chill breath dimming the rain-washed colours of the valley. Its shadow raced up the slopes. Suddenly the light went out.

"Look!" said Schultz under his breath. "Look here!"

They bent over his shoulder, looking at what he indicated. Von Prütwitz laughed.

"They've done you! You didn't dig deep enough, duffer!"

Schultz shook his head. The bewildered ants, cut off from their retreat, began to pour over the edge

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of the trench. They tumbled in, one after another, and little by little they filled it. Their brown, insignificant bodies filled it to the brink. The remainder, carrying their twig, passed over.

"One can learn something from those beggars," von Prütwitz declared admiringly. "They've got the right spirit."

But still Schultz pointed with his stubby misshapen finger.

"We're like that," he whispered. "Just like that. . . . And I'm God, and I sit here and watch—and watch—and laugh—and——"

Suddenly he sprang up and stamped upon the little moving, busy world—stamped upon it till it lay flat and still. "I—I'm just like God!" he gasped out.

The mist closed in. It whirled about them. The valleys and mountains had passed away. The rain swept down in a blinding curtain.

And Schultz lay with his face in the earth and wept.

CHAPTER VI

I

FOR two months it had not rained. Day after day the sun went down like a fever-spot, and at night the panting town folk threw open their shutters, trying to catch some vagrant breeze from the brief darkness. At four o'clock the sun showed a brazen rim above the horizon. The little freshness was burnt up like a drop of water on a sheet of white-hot metal.

In the Gymnasium there had been rumours of "heat holidays." The children were quarrelsome, listless, and irritable by turns. But the State had lately given a fresh twist to the educational screw. There were so many competitors for the posts it had to offer, it could take its choice from the best brains in the country. It lifted the examination bar a little higher, and the Herr Oberlehrer Schäfer drove his charges to the jump.

So the rumours of the heat holiday grew fainter. The children were liable to turn savagely on each other at the mention of them.

"German boys can put up with heat and cold," the Herr Oberlehrer said in his hard, colourless voice. "In England, half the year is given over to holidays because the English are an idle and effete nation. They have no strength to endure. They are sunk in luxury, they batten on the glory of their forefathers. But we Germans are a Spartan people, we know how to suffer. We steel our muscles day by day for the

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final issue. If there is weakness amongst us it must be rooted out pitilessly." His own lips were cracked with fever. Though they hated him they knew that he too was driven. In the darkened schoolroom they stirred to a patient, answering activity. "Now—we are at the beginning of the Seven Years' War. Karl Schultz, will you be kind enough to give me your idea of Germany at the beginning of this epoch?"

It was very quiet again. The little scuffling movement died away, and in the stillness they could almost hear the hot droning of the insects in the neighbouring forest. The Herr Oberlehrer repeated his summons, and slowly, painfully, Schultz dragged himself to his feet. But he said nothing. He stood in the midst of his watching companions like a stumpy little tree amidst a pale undergrowth. His face was turned to the light that sickered through the closed shutters. It looked misshapen and swollen—and over white. There was something grotesque about it—the half-comic, half-sinister semblance to a human face that the moon shows when it is full.

"Well, and how long do you require to gather your great thoughts, Schultz?"

The boy's mouth dropped open. He turned stupidly in the direction of the voice.

"Frederick the Great—Frederick the Great——"

"That's very interesting. It appears that Schultz has heard of someone called Frederick the Great. Go on."

"Frederick the Great was so fond of big soldiers, whenever he saw anyone tall he had him stolen; so everyone stooped whenever they came near."

A gust of exasperated laughter bowed the lifted heads. The Herr Oberlehrer leant forward over his desk. His voice no longer feigned an ironic suavity,

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it sounded shrill and rasping like the grinding of one metal upon another.

"Are you making fun of me by any chance?"

"Frederick the Great came to the throne——"

"Stop that gabble. Answer my question. Have you, or have you not, prepared your work?"

The child made a blind, fumbling movement with his queer misshapen hands that seemed to appeal to someone unseen.

"My head hurts, Herr Oberlehrer—my head hurts always. I can't think about anything else."

They stared at him aghast. There was hysteria in the atmosphere, a feeling of splintering nerves. Someone dropped a pencil-box and the class winced as though under the cut of a whip.

"Try not to whine, Schultz; I dislike whining. Your headache does not interest me, and this isn't a girls' school. Either you did or did not learn your lesson."

"I tried, Herr Oberlehrer, I tried—but I can't do it, I can't, really; it hurts—it hurts so."

"You young humbug! The truth is you are the biggest loafer in the class. You're a stumbling-block to the real workers, and I shall make an example of you. In the meantime you will stand there until your memory chooses to exert itself. Let there be absolute silence whilst our delicate young friend gathers his aching wits together."

They let their tension slip for an instant in a titter which died away like a feverish breath of wind. Then they were still again. Some of them gazed pitilessly at the lonely figure in their midst, others had their faces hidden.

Helmut could not bear to look, and yet again and again his eyes were drawn against his will. His

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heart seemed to be beating all over him. He could almost hear the thick throb of his pulses. The air throbbed with them. He knew what it was to stand like that—alone, no one helping, no one caring, one's brains and limbs frozen with shame and terror. He knew it so well that his soul seemed to be deserting him—to be creeping into Schultz's body—to be seeing through his eyes, sweating in his agony. When he looked up he saw himself standing there, crushed and stupefied under the growing burden of silence.

If only someone cared—did something.

And suddenly Helmut leant forward and pushed his notes into one of the limp, hanging hands. Even then he knew that it was of no good, that it was obvious and stupid. The crackling of the paper filled the room with outrageous sound. Schultz turned stupidly, but a faint light had broken over his whole face.

Then he let the papers slip.

The Herr Oberlehrer came swiftly down from his rostrum; it was like the swoop of some big, murderous bird. He stood over the two boys, and for a moment Helmut almost thought he was smiling, his eyes were so bright, and his teeth showed beneath the updrawn lips.

"You clumsy young cheats! You little fools! Do you really think you can play a stupid trick like that on me? A pair of good-for-nothings. Well, I have finished with you this time. I will not have you in this class or in this school. You contaminate it, and I shall see to it that you are removed to the idiot asylum where you belong. Get out of here—into the courtyard—and cool your heads for a little. My dog will keep you company, and keep you quiet till I

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come. No, leave your books, you will not want them again here."

They crept out from their desks as though their legs were hardly strong enough to carry them. It was such a long way to the door. They were so small and the room was so big.

And Helmut stumbled as he had stumbled once before, and this time the Herr Oberlehrer leant forward and struck him savagely across the round blond head.

II

"He had no right to do that! No right. It's forbidden. I shall complain to my father. I shall tell everybody. He will be sent away and everything will be different. He had no right."

He did not know that he was crying. The tears rolled unheeded down his hot red cheeks. He held his small sturdy figure squarely, defiantly, but his lips and nostrils were quivering. "He had no right," he repeated over and over again.

Schultz did not answer. He was calm, stolidly calm and aloof, as though what had happened did not concern him. His heavy-lidded eyes were half-closed, and his abnormal head swayed sleepily on his shoulders. And gradually the silence choked his companion's boyish fury. Pain and humiliation ceased to spur him. He was like a young horse that has flung its rider, and after a headlong gallop stands panting and quivering, awaiting retribution.

"What does it mean to be expelled?" he asked unsteadily. "I suppose he can expel us, just because we're stupid and can't get on? But what does it mean?"

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Schultz remained silent; apparently he had not heard; there was something intent about him as though he were following up a definite, rather amusing thought.

"They can't kill you just because you can't do lessons, can they?" Helmut persisted. "One hasn't got to die because one's stupid? But if one doesn't pass one's exam—but then I've never known anyone who failed—perhaps one doesn't hear of them."

He stopped, overwhelmed by a rush of vague, terrible fears. He did not know what they were, but they had to do with his father and mother who were always watching, always waiting for something; with the Geheimrat, whose approval mattered so much more than anything else; with Kurt, who would be triumphant; with the Geheimrätin, who would say: "That's just what I expected." Above all, they had to do with the world that loomed up behind these figures—a world that had no use for failures.

But then what happened? Or were Schultz and he the only boys that ever failed—lonely, horrible abnormalities?

The full midday sunlight poured down into the courtyard, and the air shimmered with parched, suffocating heat. The pavement burned underfoot. From the shuttered windows of the school-house came the drone of children's voices, but outside the gates it was still as death, even the hum of insects had dropped to an exhausted, quiescent silence.

The two children stood helplessly in the glare of the sun. They dared not go in to fetch their caps, and there was no shade except where the one tree threw its branches over the wall. And in that little square of shadow lay the Herr Oberlehrer's Teufel,

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watching them, its lolling tongue a spot of bright colour in the bleached monotony.

It was with a purpose that the Herr Oberlehrer had spoken of him. He knew—and was pleased to know—that next to himself his dog was the most feared being in the school. An ill-conditioned cur at best, in the playground, where it would occasionally appear, it seemed to take to itself something of its master's temper. It would attack without provocation, cruelly, effectually, and to strike it or kick it off was beyond the courage of the bravest. For the Herr Oberlehrer loved the animal. With Teufel he could be gentle, caressing, and even playful. It was as though the savage, pitiless nature awoke in him a difficult respect.

"If only we could run away," Helmut muttered—"somewhere where they would never find us."

A wave of physical sickness swept up from the pit of his stomach, and he had to clench his teeth to keep it back. His head buzzed as though every drop of blood in him had a little voice, and a yellow, foetid smelling mist swam before his eyes.

For the first time Schultz was speaking.

"Hullo, Teufel—nice dog, nice dog, Teufel."

He crouched down, patting the ground, the other hand with a lump of meat between the crooked fingers, temptingly extended. "Come on, Teufel, good dog——"

Helmut forgot fear and sickness.

"Why, I wouldn't give him anything—the beast!"

The voice continued its sing-song reiteration.

"Come on, Teufel, good dog."

"Fancy your wanting to feed him."

Schultz called softly. A feverish purpose was in

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his voice, in every movement. It lent him a strange forcefulness—almost a dignity. Suddenly Helmut became afraid of him.

The dog lifted his head. He too seemed aware of something unusual. He rose, yawned, and stretched himself, and came nearer, sullen, reluctant, but compelled. He sniffed at the outstretched hand, showing his ugly fangs.

"Good dog, Teufel."

The boy and the dog eyed each other. A challenge might have passed between them. Viciously the animal snapped the meat from the steady hand and gulped at it.

"I'd have killed him first," Helmut stammered.

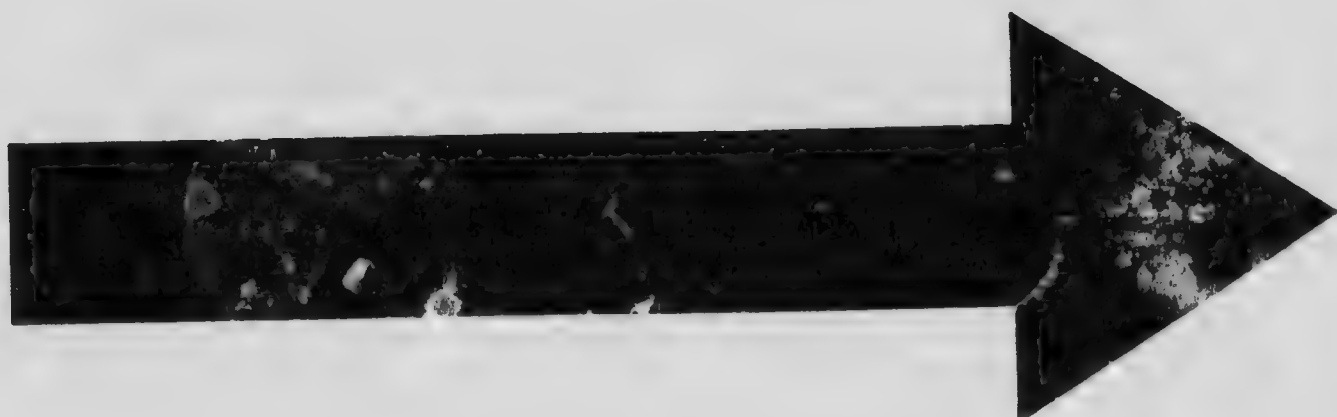
Schultz smiled vaguely. He got up, still watching the dog, which had fallen into an abrupt immobility. Its jaws hung open, and there was a look of puzzlement, of comic incredulity on its ugly face.

Then it began to cough. At first it was just an ordinary cough, but it persisted. Presently the dog lay down, worrying at its muzzle with its paws, rolling over, twisting to the accompaniment of the gasping, suffocating whine. It grew louder, piercing. It was like the cry of a human being, tortured out of human semblance. Suddenly, as though galvanised, the dog leapt up on its hind legs, pawing the air.

At first Helmut had laughed. It had been funny to see the dreaded tyrant rolling and twisting like a harmless puppy, now it was terrible. It looked at Helmut—the thing he had hated looked at him with Schnäützchen's eyes—brown eyes, full of pathetic, piteous questioning.

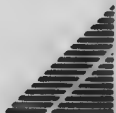
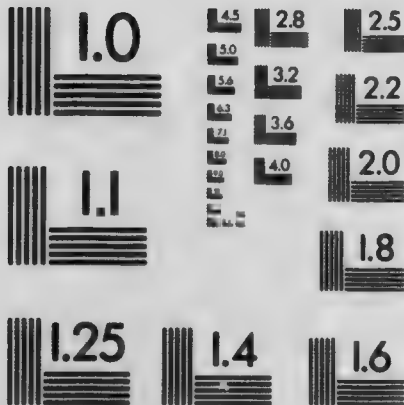
"Karl—what is it? What's the matter?"

But still Schultz did not answer. His white face was blank. He stood passive, his hands thrust in his



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pockets, watching with the dazed intentness of someone who is not yet quite awake.

Teufel had dropped down upon his forepaws—crying again, a muffled protesting cry. Now, as though released from a chain, he began to race round the courtyard, full speed, striking against the walls, reeling, choking, screaming. And behind him trailed blood, a circling pattern on the grey stones.

There were faces at the window; the drone of voices had long since died away. In a moment, as it seemed to Helmut, the courtyard was full of people. He had a vague impression of the Herr Oberlehrer flying past him—a gaunt, black vulture with flapping wings. He saw him fling himself in front of the raging animal, catch at it and go down with it.

The screaming ceased. For a long minute no one moved. The Herr Oberlehrer and his dog lay in a black heap together. At last the man rose. He stood over the quiet outstretched body. There was something in his hand—something red that dripped through his fingers.

"Who did this?" his voice was subdued, almost gentle—more terrible than they had ever heard it. "Someone gave my dog meat—meat packed with needles. There were two boys alone with him—Felde and Schultz, which of you two is it?"

The silence hung over them like a sword. Helmut turned dazedly towards his companion. The blank look had gone, the white face was convulsed and twitching with full consciousness—with an agony of naked animal terror. The Oberlehrer came nearer—slowly, slowly, inevitably.

"Who was it?"

The stubby hand rose, it pointed—

"It was he—Helmut—Helmut did it."

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Helmut turned. He had not thought of protest—only of escape. But the black figure sprang on him. He screamed involuntarily, as the steel hands fastened on his arms. But they whirled him up and up—and then, suddenly, flung him headlong out of the glaring sunlight into darkness.

III

In the morning the Herr Oberlehrer's place was taken by a junior master—a young man who could not subdue the murmurs that rose and died away again like an uneasy wind. Rumour and counter-rumour ran from class to class with a lightning swiftness.

It was Kurt who told them that Helmut had recovered consciousness, but that he was never coming back.

And at midday another rumour reached them. And suddenly the whispering ceased. The children moved on tiptoe. They did not speak to one another. They avoided each other's eyes as though they were afraid of what they would see there.

Karl Schultz had confessed. He had left a letter. And now he was dead. He had waited for two hours and then thrown himself in front of the Orient Express at the level crossing.

What the express had left was to be buried in the Town Cemetery that night.

And it was Karl Schultz's birthday—his eleventh birthday.

CHAPTER VII

I

THE Gasthaus stood at the head of the Seven Waterfalls. Through a narrow cleft in the mountains it peered out on to the Rhine Valley, and on days when the summer haze lifted one could see the great river lying like a glittering, uncoiled snake across the plain.

Hundreds of years before Franciscan monks had kept watch from the narrow fastness, and the Angelus had broken sweetly through the ceaseless song of falling water. But now the monastery lay in ruins behind the Gasthaus; careless, irreverent feet trod the worn cloisters, and the eternal voice was drowned in laughter and singing, and the clink of glasses.

The fir trees grew close about the monastery. They held it in a dark embrace, protecting it against the invasion of insolent men. And when the night came they triumphed sombrely. Their darkness rustled and murmured with forgotten things. The moon, falling aslant between their pointed shadows, clothed the crumbling walls in white glory, and an unearthly life awoke and moved with sweeping garments through the roofless chapel.

Then the water of the seven falls was like the low singing of a great choir.

At night Helmut lay awake, listening, trying to catch the words which flowed away from him just as he seemed to hold them fast. Even through his fantastic, uneasy dreams he pursued them desperately,

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patiently, knowing they held the reason for all he suffered.

But in the daytime he crept away through the belt of forest, high up to a sudden opening where the meadows ran lush and sparkling to the banks of the little lake. Here was silence. The water lay like a darkly polished shield under the clear sky, with the cathedral spires of the forest reflected upon its unruffled surface.

The stillness was a cool hand upon his heart. For hours he sat in the shade of the trees, his face between his hands, and looked out over the drowsy peace. There were no thoughts to trouble him. His tired brain was as quiet as the water. When a broad-winged butterfly fluttered like a painted leaf through the sunlight he felt a little frightened happiness stir within him.

Then one day, at the long dinner table, the Geheimrat explained the origin of the waterfall.

"It comes from a secret passage somewhere at the bottom of the lake," he said. "No one has ever been able to discover the exact source or explain the fact that the level of the lake never changes. It is a mystery, but"—the Geheimrat waved a fat hand—"there is no mystery beyond the reach of human intelligence."

The guests applauded solemnly.

That afternoon, when Helmut crept back wearily to his place beneath the trees, he knew that something had changed. The peace had gone. Or it had never really been. Beneath the placid surface things moved—darkly, unfathomably. There was no real rest anywhere. It was only a seeming. Night and day, year after year for generations beyond memory, the water had thundered down the seven falls, coming

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from no one knew where, and racing onward had met the great river and been lost. Night and day for generations unborn it would be still rushing to its sacrifice, an army of uncounted millions unknown and unseen, save when the rocks tossed them for an instant into sight.

And every second the little lake would give of itself and show no sign.

That ceaseless, purposeless activity, that ceaseless, purposeless giving, stung his numb brain to an unwilling sensibility. Thoughts flickered up like points of flame from a kindling fire. They came and went, and every time they came they were brighter and keener. They showed him pictures that he had held away from him with a child's instinct of self-preservation.

There was Heini, tumbling into the flames, and the Oberlehrer towering up and up until he blotted out the sky, and the dog that raced round the courtyard in a track of blood—and Schultz—Schultz as he had seen him through long weeks of delirium; Schultz—just a little awful bundle lying between the rails.

And at last he sprang up. He ran as fast as his unsteady legs could carry him—away from the lake—away from the sound of falling water—headlong downhill through the forest.

II

He had never been to the foot of the waterfalls before. The steep steps, the flimsy balustrade, the near thunder, had made him too dizzy. But now in his panic-stricken flight down the pathless mountainside he had reached the valley.

A funny little sensation ran up his spine. He

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wanted to laugh and cry in one breath. And he had not cried since that last day in the Gymnasiura, and he had never laughed. But it was so funny. So much noise and terror and splendour, and then just this little bit of stream at the end of it all—this jolly rivulet jumping from boulder to boulder, falling into deep pools and tumbling out again in miniature cascades, tossing a handful of diamonds into the sunlight—no more terrible than a laughing baby.

And the phantoms which had hunted at his heels fell away from him. His knees shook and he dropped down on to the moss and rolled over with his arms outstretched and blinked up at the golden light. He lay there in an ecstasy of content. He thought: "I must hold tight to this minute so that it won't go—so that it will always be like this—so that they won't ever come and fetch me and take me back again."

But somehow he could not hold on tight. The minutes wriggled away from between his fingers. Perhaps after all he did not really want to keep them. The water called to him—not terribly now, but gaily and dancingly. Content was not enough. He rolled over again on his stomach, and with chin propped on his hands, watched the brook leap down-hill with drowsy, happy eyes. The water was crystal-clear and sparkling. It made him thirsty. He wanted to drink it. Other shy little wishes ran in and out of his thoughts. It would be jolly to plunge one's hot hands into the water—to splash about—or most daring of all to take off one's shoes and stockings and paddle down stream on and on."

There was no one looking. He crawled nearer. How deep some of the pools were—much deeper than they seemed. And there were fish in them—long,

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motionless shadows lying on the sunlit bed. He dropped a stone into the water and in a flash they were gone—so swiftly one could not follow them, one could not even guess their hiding-place.

After all someone had been looking. Someone jumped up from behind a boulder on the opposite bank. A shrill young voice called fiercely:

"Du böse Bub! Du böse Bub!"

He stared at her in consternation. It was as startling as though a real water *Nixe*—one of Anra's fairy-folk—had sprung out at him. She was small and slender and brown—bare brown legs, a brown petticoat, a brown cotton bodice, brown brown little face, brown eyes, dark brown hair, plaited in two long plaits. The little fist that she shook at Helmut was burnt as brown as a berry.

"You horrid little boy—you've spoilt everything."

He continued to stare helplessly.

"I didn't—I didn't know."

"Couldn't you see what I was doing?"

"I didn't see you even."

"I was tickling a trout—a great big fat fellow—and he had just gone to sleep, and then you came and splashed, you big booby!"

"But I didn't know. Besides——" He had recovered his breath now. After all she was only a little girl—a little village girl. It wouldn't do to let her bully him—a Gymnasist—with the yellow cap of the Quinta. "Besides—one can't catch trout like that. It's all a fairy tale."

"Oh, is it?" She considered him scornfully. "You're from Karlstadt, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, I know all those people from up there." She nodded in the direction of the Kurhaus. "And

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they all come from Karlstadt, and they all talk like you do—with the tip of their tongues."

"It's the proper way to talk."

"Who says so?" She did not wait for an answer, but returned indignantly to his first offence. "Anyhow, one can tickle trout; my brother has done it heaps of times, and I would have done it then if you hadn't interfered and made such a noise."

"Well, why don't you do it now?"

"With you there?"

"I won't make a noise again."

"Yes, you would. You did it on purpose."

"I didn't." He was hot and trembling with anger.

"I didn't even see you."

"Well—you said I told lies."

"I didn't."

"You said it was all a fairy tale."

"Perhaps some fairy tales are true," said Helmut cunningly.

She considered him for a moment in silence. Then her black brows relaxed. She smiled shyly.

"Anyhow the fish won't come again now. You've frightened them away."

"I'm sorry."

"My name's Lenchen," she volunteered.

He got up and lifted his yellow cap solemnly.

"I'm Helmut—Helmut Felde."

"I like that. It's a nice name. Why do you wear that funny yellow hat?"

"It's my class cap. I belong to the Gymnasium. I'm in the Quinta now."

"That sounds awfully grand."

He blushed up to the roots of his flaxen, close-cropped hair. It did him good to hear her say that. It was as though she had put a healing ointment on

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a secret wound that was always hurting him. She didn't know how low he was in his class. He wouldn't need to tell her. He liked the way she looked at him, with such solemn, brown eyes. It made him hold himself straight.

"I expect you go to school too," he said with manly graciousness.

"Oh, yes. Three times a week in the summer, twice a week in the winter. It is three miles to the school, and in the winter we run down on our toboggans. It's great fun then. But we don't wear caps, ever."

"It's jolly to be without a cap sometimes," Helmut said consolingly. "It makes one feel—so—so free."

She did not answer, and they looked smilingly at each other across the narrow stream, anxious and timid and eager as two young animals who are not yet quite sure of each other. It was Lenchen who took the next step.

"Are you all alone?" she asked.

"Yes, quite. At least—my people are up there, but—but that's different."

"Haven't you anyone to play with?"

"Oh, no. I—I don't play."

"Are you so grown up?"

"I'm eleven—nearly."

"P'raps you're too grand to play."

Her tone was serious, without mockery. He shook his head.

"Oh, no, it's not that. I'm not grand a bit, but I haven't had any time to play. One has to work."

"I work too," she said. "Awfully hard. I have my lessons, and then at harvest time I help in the fields, and in the winter I carve the birds grandfather puts on his cuckoo clocks. But I play too. I used

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to play a lot with my brother Hans, but they've sent him to work in the town. Now I have no one to play with. I love playing."

He looked at her wistfully.

"I used to like it too. It's such a long time ago—I've forgotten."

"I—I suppose you wouldn't play with me?"

"Yes, I would. I'd love to. If you'd only show me how."

Her eyes were full of a shy eagerness.

"Hans and I made up our own games. P'raps they're silly."

"I'm sure they're not. I'd like to play—if you'd let me."

He had only one fear now—that she would find out how stupid he was; that she would grow tired of him and leave him. She bent down and picked up a broken piece of branch.

"It's a race," she explained. "You choose your boat, and then when I count one, two, three, we both throw ours in, and the boat that gets to the bridge first wins. We have to run alongside, you know, to watch, because they're all so much alike. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I've got my piece. I'm ready."

"One—two—three—off!"

He saw at once that there was more in the game than at first met the eye. For one thing, so much depended on your choice of branch. His was too broad, too clumsy. It stuck in between stones. It refused to be hurried; it jibbed at waterfalls. Lenchen's fancy was slender and light as herself. It leaped chasms, it shot through narrow gorges like an arrow. On the full stream it was a positive race-horse. And Lenchen ran beside it, leaping and

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laughing, throwing up her bare arms in joyous excitement. Helmut ran on the opposite bank. He forgot the game. He left his charge shamefully in the lurch. He could not take his eyes off that flying figure. She was free, free like the butterflies and the flashing lizards that he had watched through the long summer days, like all the forest creatures that he loved and dimly envied. His knees shook and his heart thumped against his ribs. But somewhere in the darkness a little spring of happiness was bubbling up.

"Lenchen ! "

"I've won ! I've won ! " she screamed.

"Lenchen ! "

He stumbled. The trembling knees broke under him. He hardly tried to save himself.

For a moment it was all dark. But he was conscious of being very weary—very much at peace. He heard someone cry out and the splash of water. He felt someone bend over him—a pair of strong young arms clasped him about the shoulders.

"Helmut—oh, Helmut, are you hurt ? "

He opened his eyes heavily. The trees and the moss-covered floor made a green mist before his eyes. But after a while he saw her face, close to his, so anxious, so pitying that he forced himself to speak.

"It's all right ; I'm so sorry—I'm not very strong—I can't run much—I've been very ill."

She let him slip down to the ground again, but in a moment she was back, and he drank the cool water out of her brown hands.

"I know what it feels like," she said eagerly. "I've been ill too. I had scarlet-fever. I was dreadfully, dreadfully ill."

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"It wasn't like that," he said. "It was different. I never brought me here to try and get me well."

But he did not want to speak. He was tired—exquisitely tired. She still held him close, and his head rested against her shoulder. She passed her hard, cool, little hand over his eyes. There was something urgent, passionate, in her caress. She hushed her shrill young voice to a crooning murmur.

"Poor Helmutchen; poor Helmutchen."

"I shall be all right soon."

"What made you so? Didn't they let you play?"

"I'm so stupid." He did not care now that she knew. He was sure now that she wouldn't leave him. "I can't learn my lessons—that made people hate me. And then something awful happened."

"What dreadful thing?"

"There was another boy—and he couldn't do his lessons either. It made his head hurt so frightfully. And the master hated him too—and badgered him. And he killed the master's dog. He put needles in the dog's food."

"Oh!"

"The master thought I'd done it—and—and—then he struck me, and I was delirious."

A convulsive shudder shook him. She held him closer.

"How silly! How silly! Anyone could tell you hadn't done it." Her voice shook with anger. "I could have told them you couldn't do a terrible thing like that. You're such a pretty boy."

"I'm so stupid."

"What does that matter? You're nice and kind and good."

He shook his head.

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"You don't understand. One must do one's work—one must be able to get on."

"Why?"

He groped anxiously through his little stock of wisdom.

"Because of the State," he found at last.

"What's a State?"

"Germany is the State——" He lifted his head. "You see, if we can't make her bigger and stronger we're no good."

"And if we're stupid—and—and can't do anything?"

"Stupid people have to be weeded out," he asserted.

"I don't believe that. I'm sure it's not true. Our Pastor says that Christ liked stupid people—and little children."

He smiled. He felt terribly wise and old.

"Nobody believes in Christ. Perhaps you do. Country people are more con—conservative. They cling to things. But we—we know it's all a fairy tale. We've got to start all over again—we've got to work things out for ourselves."

He knew that she could not understand—not even enough to argue. But her arms relaxed and fell away from him.

"And—and—the other boy—the real one?"

"He killed himself." Her shudder made him angry. It was so silly—so like a girl. "Well, it was the best thing he could do," he said roughly. "He was no good—and he knew it."

"He was cruel."

"No, he wasn't. He was off his head. Besides, everyone's cruel. We all hurt each other—down to the teeniest, weeniest ant. It's not cruelty that

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matters—it's being weak. Weakness is the greatest sin."

She sprang free from him—straight up—her hands clenched at her side, her little face white under the tan.

"It's wicked," she cried out, "it's wicked. I won't—I won't believe it. I thought you were a nice little boy—but you're horrid—you make me frightened."

"Lenchen——"

Her eyes were hot with anger, with a child's royal anger, uncorrupted and pitiless. He could not meet it. He wanted to say, "You're just a silly little girl. You don't understand. Life's like that——" But her wrath was implacable. It daunted him. It was no use feeling old and wise if one felt guilty too.

"Lenchen——" he repeated anxiously.

"Go away! I don't like you—you're horrid—horrid."

She tore her hand from his and ran fleetly across the narrow wooden bridge. She was almost lost among the trees when he sprang up, calling to her. All his superiority had gone, all his little wisdom tumbled into ruins. He was almost crying.

"Please—Lenchen—Lenchen—don't go. I'm sorry—I'm awfully sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry—really I didn't—please—Lenchen——" His shaken, pleading voice just held her. She stood motionless in the shadow like an alarmed young doe, her head lifted. "I'm not really horrid—I've been so ill—p'raps that's why—you might be kind, Lenchen—you ought to be kind to people who're ill."

She turned very slowly towards him, looking at him distrustfully out of the corners of her eyes.

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"You don't really mean all that nasty stuff?"

"No, I mean—people tell you things—one has to believe something. But p'raps they're wrong—p'raps your fairy stories are true—if you'd only tell them to me."

He was shameless in his fear.

"You won't frighten me again?"

"No—never. Not so long as I live. Word of honour. Please come back and play."

"You don't want to play. You're so wise and grand. You were just making fun."

"I wasn't. I'm so lonely, Lenchen. I haven't anybody to play with. It makes me so dull and stupid—please——"

Still she watched him with her quaint air of mistrust. Then suddenly she laughed, showing her white teeth—and in a flash was gone.

Some instinct forbade his following. But he shouted her name again and again into the forest till it rang like an exultant war-cry.

III

Every day they met at the foot of the waterfall and played together. She taught him all her games and they made up new ones. When they were tired they sat at the stream's edge and talked and tried to tickle trout though they never caught any.

"It's because you don't believe," Lenchen would say severely.

"But I do—I do believe," he would answer. "I do."

But then he would feel a sharp pain run through him—like the pain of a wound that will never quite heal.

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For when one is so old and wise it is hard to believe anything—even the truth.

IV

On Sunday he saw her in the white church in the valley. She sat in the front row on the women's side, and looked up with solemn eyes at the Pastor from under the broad flat hat with the red pom-poms. Even her legs in the white stockings and her feet in the black buckle shoes looked solemn. One could not imagine their being so graceless and unashamed as to run naked and cut capers. Altogether she seemed so wrapped in goodness that Helmut felt a strange wave of shame and contrition pass over him—and the strangest part of it all was that it left him tingling all over with happiness.

She did not look at him at all—or once indeed when her eyes met his it was with grave reproach. He could almost hear her say, "Helmut, you're not attending."

After that he sang the hymns so loudly that the Geheimrat frowned. And he tried hard to believe them. For when he almost succeeded he seemed to be nearer to her.

V

It was the last day of the holidays.

Helmut stood in his little bedroom and tied a nosegay of wild flowers together with the ribbon off his school-cap. On a scrubby piece of paper he had carefully and painstakingly written out a poem. He had composed it the night before—in bed. It began:

"My Lenchen is like the running stream,"
and ran to four lyrical and impassioned verses.

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The composing of it had helped him not to cry. Now he did not want to cry at all. The sun shone. Even the thought of Kurt, of the thick cruel mouth and bulging blue eyes could not daunt him. For there was one day left—one long day which must never, never be allowed to pass.

The door opened, and he thrust the posy and poem ruthlessly into the bosom of his blouse. Though he pretended to be absorbed in something else and did not look round he knew that it was his mother. He heard the crackling of her stiff silk bodice.

"Helmut, why are you upstairs? Why don't you come down? You're always moping by yourself. It isn't nice, it doesn't look well. Your uncle has been asking for you; he has something to tell you."

She was out of breath, and her voice sounded flustered and anxious. At another time her message would have frightened him. But now he only half listened.

"I was just tidying things up, Mother."

"Yes. That's all very well. If only you would keep your hands clean. No, don't stop to wash them now. Your uncle hates waiting. He's on the balcony. Helmut——"

"Yes, Mother——"

He came back reluctantly and she bent over him, tidying his blouse, fussing his hair with plump hard hands. He thought suddenly how horrible her face was when it came close. And yet just at that moment he could have put his arms round her and hugged her and told her all about Lenchen. So often his mother had made him feel like that, as though her dull ugliness were something sad and pitiful that brought them closer to one another.

"Helmut, Liebling, when your uncle speaks to

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you you will be good, won't you? You must try to be more grateful. You're such a funny little fellow, so stiff and stolid and unaffectionate. People don't always understand that it's your shyness. And you know your uncle has been so good to you. It was he who brought us up here when you were getting better. We could never have afforded it. And he's promised to help you in your career. You know, we can't do much for you, Helmut. Your poor father has been so unfortunate. When he was a young man he offended his chief—and—and he hasn't been advanced as we had hoped. That ought to be a lesson to you always to consider your superiors, to be polite to them and appreciative——"

"Yes, Mother."

"You ought to make more of your uncle and aunt and Kurt."

"I hate Kurt."

He felt her draw herself away from him.

"You're not to say things like that."

"It's true. I do hate him. He's cruel, and he hates me."

"That's because you're naughty to him. They think you're jealous because he gets on so well at school."

"He cheats—and tells lies——"

"Never mind. That's not your business. He succeeds and you don't. You ought to be polite and—and kind. You ought to say nice things to him to please him. After all, when you're grown up he might be in a position to hurt you—in the army, or in the Government, or in business. He might spoil your career just as your poor father's career has been spoiled."

"But I don't want a career."

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"Helmut, don't be silly. Everyone has a career in our position."

"I—I want to play," he burst out eagerly, "and—and then I'd like to be a farmer and work in the fields and have pigs——"

She stood right away from him, looking at him as though at someone unfamiliar and frightening.

"You mustn't talk like that—even in fun. Supposing your uncle heard you? He'd think you had no feeling of honour, Helmut—no feeling of Standesehre. You couldn't be a farmer. All our family have served the Government. It would be a disgrace. One owes something to one's position, Helmut. One can't do as one likes."

"Birds do," he persisted, "and butterflies and squirrels. They play in the wood all day——"

"Until they get hunted and killed. That ought to be a lesson——"

"And Schultz got killed too," he said.

He was following a new train of thought and did not see her face. It had grown cold and hard and white. There was a note of reserve, almost of antagonism in her colourless voice.

"I suppose this is the result of holidays, Helmut. And you've been ill, so one must excuse you. But you're talking very stupidly and wickedly. Karl Schultz brought disgrace upon his people, and when he killed himself he did the only thing he could do. People can't live after they're disgraced—not in our position." She softened suddenly. She pleaded. "Helmut, you mustn't fail us, you must be good. Your father and I—we hope so much from you. You're everything to us. And we've been so sad and anxious. You will try and please everyone—and work hard—and make us proud of you?"

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He looked up at her. Her face was quivering and her eyes red with tears, but he thrust an answering distress away from him. He only thought of how quickly he could escape.

"Yes, Mother—I'll try."

"Mein liebes Kerlchen!"

They went downstairs together, and her hand on his shoulder kept his rebellious feet from jumping two steps at a time. She drew him closer to her as they came out on to the veranda where the Geheimrat and his brother-in-law sat over their afternoon coffee. It was as though she were trying to subdue him with the nearness of her strong body.

The Geheimrat was in a facetious temper. He had dined well. The smear of cigar ash on his waistcoat, the disorder of empty cups and glasses on the table, the pose of his soft big limbs suggested an obscene satiety. His face was flushed and heavy. He looked like a big black crow drowsing in the sun after some repulsive meal.

He leant forward and pinched his nephew's ear.

"Na, young gentleman, and how are you, eh?"

"I am very well, Uncle," said Helmut gravely, "thank you."

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, Uncle, thank you very much."

"Good. You've been running wild long enough, though. Too much loafing isn't good for German boys, eh?"

The grip on his shoulder tightened. He glanced across at his father. The Herr Amtschreiber sat on the edge of his chair, smiling with weak, anxious eyes.

"You've had splendid holidays, haven't you, Helmut?"

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"Yes, Father, thank you, Uncle."

"Panting to get back to work, eh?" The Geheimrat chuckled.

"Oh, yes, Uncle——"

The red face grew suddenly pitiless.

"Well, you've got a lot to make up for. You've done very badly so far. If it hadn't been for that illness of yours—I can't put up with that sort of thing, you know. I am not going to help lame dogs over stiles. That's what I want to tell you. If you want help from me you've got to show you're worth helping. You're not going back to the Gymnasium—you know that?"

Helmut glanced swiftly over his shoulder towards the forest and then back into the Geheimrat's face.

"Y-yes, Uncle."

"You're going to the Institut Bernhard. That's where all the idle youngsters are sent. And not one of them has dared to fail yet. They cram you there like Strassburger geese—so——" He pantomimed someone pouring liquid through a funnel into his open mouth. "When they've finished with you we'll get you into a line regiment, and after that we'll see what can be done. But you'll have to pull yourself together. Verstanden?"

He spoke loudly so that all the other hotel guests heard and looked at the small feverishly flushed boy and smiled.

A faint tremor of anxiety shook him. But it passed as quickly as a gust of wind through the branches of a tree.

"Yes, Uncle—I'll try."

"I'm sure he'll do his best to show his gratitude," the Herr Amtschreiber began.

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The Geheimrat waved his cigar silencingly.

"We all hope so. You know what happens to boys who don't pass their Einjähriges exam., Helmut?"

But Helmut did not answer. His attention had escaped—it was racing ahead of him—down hill to the forest. He did not even see the Geheimrat, though he was staring at him. All that the Geheimrat had threatened was just so much sound.

It concerned to-morrow—and to-morrow was afar off—something negligible and unrealisable like death.

"Didn't you hear, Helmut?"

He started, smiling vaguely.

"Oh, yes, Uncle——"

"If you fail in your exam. you will have to go into the Army as a common soldier for three years. You will be outdistanced by your contemporaries. Every opening will be closed to you. You won't expect help from me then, eh?"

He thought, "Perhaps she won't wait——"

"Oh, yes—yes, Uncle—no, Uncle."

"Good. We understand each other. You can go."

The hand checked the wild impulse. He lifted his cap and made a solemn little bow from the waist. The hand released him.

Sedately he walked down the steps and the path that led to the brink of the forest. He paused and looked back. But he was out of sight.

Then he gave a choking, delirious little shout and began to run. He ran faster and faster. And at last the hill ran away with him altogether and toppled him over, panting and laughing, on to the moss-covered roots of a big pine tree.

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VI

Lenchen helped to pick him up and tried to rub the green stain off his knickers. There were pine needles all over him, even in his thatch of flaxen hair. She brushed him anxiously, keeping her eyes resolutely lowered.

"You might have hurt yourself," she scolded. "Boys are always so rough and clumsy."

"And girls are always crying," he retorted gleefully. "I believe you're crying now, Lenchen."

"I'm not."

"Well, you've been crying."

I haven't."

"Now who's telling fairy tales?"

He prepared to do a highly aggravating waltz round her, but suddenly she looked straight at him, and he stood still.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said. "I supposed you had forgotten."

His own eyes had grown round and serious.

"Would—would you have minded so much, Lenchen?"

"I don't know. I like playing. And I've no one to play with now except you——" She shrugged her small shoulders crossly. "Well—it's no good standing here, anyhow——"

She went on up the steep mountain-path very much as though she did not care whether he followed or not. She walked so fast that he had to run to catch up with her. They continued side by side, getting very hot and breathless, Helmut every now and then casting anxious, rather awestruck glances at his companion's face.

"Lenchen—I say—Lenchen——"

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"Well?"

"You know I couldn't help it. They wouldn't let me go—they kept on jawing at me. I—I nearly cried myself——"

The pace slackened. She was listening like some doubtful bird, with its head cocked to catch the faintest suspicious sound.

"I don't believe you did."

"I did—honour bright. If they hadn't let me come I—I should have howled."

It was magnanimous. She stopped to look at him, her cheeks bright with colour.

"Really, Helmut?"

"Howled," he emphasised nobly.

He had his first glimpse of the elusive, feminine temperament. She gave a sudden shrill little laugh, pinched his arm and was off down a side-path, skipping like a mocking brown elf, her two plaits flying out behind her. Helmut followed at a rather sullen trot. He felt sure that she had been making fun of him all the time—had compromised his masculine dignity for the sheer fun of the thing. It was all the more disconcerting, when he caught up with her again, that she was quite serious.

"Oh, Helmut, you are a darling."

"Oh!" he said helplessly.

She took his injured arm and squeezed it hard.

"We're going to have a whole happy day together—aren't we?"

He gave a solemn nod. He was not going to tell her about to-morrow. He was afraid of telling her. She might not understand what a long way off to-morrow was.

"Yes. Let's do something extra, shall we?"

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Something different. I—I'd like something quite special."

"We'll go up to the Ludwigshöhe," she decided. "It will be so hot there'll be no one there. We shall have it all to ourselves. What did you bring?"

He fumbled in his trouser-pocket and produced a crumbling and slightly soiled lump of *Sandtorte*.

"I sneaked it yesterday afternoon at tea."

"And I've kept my breakfast Butterbrötchen. We'll share and drink out of the brook. It will be like an adventure."

The word gave him a little thrill of memory. Years ago Heini and Fritz Schnäutchen and he had adventures.

"Let's pretend——" he said eagerly. "Let's pretend we're lost—or that there's been a terrible earthquake and we're the only people left in the whole world."

She considered seriously.

"I don't think I'd like that. You see, there's grandfather and mother—and Hans—and my aunt over at Gutach—I wouldn't like them to be killed——"

He walked on in silence. He was ashamed and a little disappointed. He saw that it was unkind to have wanted to clear off a lot of nice people for the sake of the Geheimrat and Kurt. At the same time the fact that Lenchen loved some of those nice people threw a sort of shadow between them.

"I expect you're awfully fond of your grandfather and mother—and Hans—and—and—your aunt——" he said at last.

"Of course I am. Aren't you?"

"I haven't got any. I mean—I don't know—p'raps town-people are different."

"I don't think I like town-people at all," said

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Lenchen, lifting her sleek round head proudly, "except you, Helmut. And you're not a bit like them."

It was full afternoon now. The sun struck with hot golden shafts between the trees that lined the steep stony path. The sleepy air weighed heavily on them so that they lagged and straggled one behind the other. At the end Lenchen led. She kept on pitilessly. Helmut, breathless and panting, fixed his eyes on the little brown heels that twinkled from boulder to boulder just above him. His heart pounded against his ribs and his breath came hard and short, but he kept the little brown heels in sight.

At last the trees thinned. They came out into a wide clearing, in the midst of which stood a wooden hut, labelled "Aussichtspunkt." The path straggled on aimlessly for a few yards and ended in a surprised kind of way with a rustic balustrade.

Lenchen lifted her bare arms above her head.

"Now we're at the top of the world," she cried exultantly. "There's nothing higher than we are."

He found breath to stammer:

"Oh, but there's Mont Blanc, Lenchen, and heaps of other mountains—miles higher."

She pushed him indignantly.

"You're such a horrid little boy, Helmut. What's the use of playing if you don't play properly? I feel I am at the top of the world, and so I am at the top. Don't spoil things."

"Sorry," he muttered humbly.

He stood close beside her. He felt very ashamed. She was quite right. It was horrid to talk about Mont Blanc. He would never have thought of such a thing when he had played with Heini and Fritz Schnäützchen—even supposing he had known about it, which he hadn't. He wondered vaguely what

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made him spoil things—things he loved. "I'll play properly now," he promised anxiously.

She smiled upon him, her wide kind smile.

"It's only because you're so clever, Helmut."

"But I'm not. I'm stupid. I mix things up. Lenchen—I think I could play better—I mean, would it matter if I pretended I was all alone in the world—with you?"

"Why, no—of course not."

He became animated and purposeful.

"That'll be splendid. We'll bivouac here. You see, it's a safe place. We can't be attacked on three sides because of the precipice. But I'll have to explore round first to see if there aren't any murderers or brigands——"

"But everyone's dead, Helmut."

"Now who's being horrid? Besides—there'd be wolves and things. And you're under my protection. You ought to do as you're told, you know. Sit down under the trees and wait till I come back——"

She looked at him with solemn admiration.

"Oughtn't you to have weapons?"

"I have weapons." He thrust a branch through his belt and patted it significantly. "Now I'm armed to the teeth. You're not frightened, are you?"

"No, no. Not very."

He glanced back anxiously.

"You won't eat all the bread and butter, will you, Lenchen?"

She made a sign of taking a tremendous oath, and he plunged boldly into the forest. It was not a game any more. It was as real as anything had ever been when he and Heini and Fritz Schnäützchen had set out on their adventures. There *were* wolves and "things"—in spite of the earthquake there might

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even be brigands. And he was not afraid. If a whole pack of wolves had set on him he would have met them undaunted. He would have killed them—every one—because he would be defending Lenchen who trusted him, and who for all her boldness was just a little bit afraid.

He was a knight—a Siegfried setting out to win glory for his Brünhilde who waited for him on her lonely rock——

He sent a ringing shout of defiance at the enemy.

But no one answered. He stood still and listened to his shout. It went on and on through the forest. It was as though he had given life to something, that it had got away from him and laughed at him. And afterwards when it had gone there was the silence. He had not noticed it before. Now with every minute it grew more and more profound. It was very dark, too. Where he stood the sun had never penetrated for a hundred years. The straight, bare stems of the pine trees dwelt amidst night and twilight. No birds had ever built their nests among the branches. The stillness was never broken by the flutter of a bird's wings or a note of a bird's song. It was as though death lived there.

Helmut knew that there were invisible things all round him. He could feel them watching. But he could not see them—yet. They lay just outside his vision. Karl Schultz was there—quite close. If he did not move—if he did not make an effort he would see him distinctly——

He had not seen Karl Schultz since he had played with Lenchen.

He forced himself to walk on. He did not think of wolves or brigands any more. They were not real. Not real like the invisible people. His feet were

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leaden, just as they are in those awful nightmares when one tries to escape and can't. And he was very cold. All at once he began to run—and ran madly, with the enemy hot at his heels—out into the sunshine again——

There was Lenchen, waiting for him, her arms folded about her knees, the *Butterbrötchen* solemnly placed in front of her—like a little dog on trust. She waved to him, and he forgot why he had been afraid.

"Why, Helmut, what a time you've been! Have you killed them all?"

"All the ones I could kill," he said soberly.

"There are things one can't kill," she remarked—"fairies and witches and people like that. Even earthquakes can't kill them. There's a little house down in the valley just peeping out of the trees. I'm sure a witch lives there——"

"It's the Forsthaus——" he began, but she silenced him with the crusty edge of the *Butterbrötchen*.

"Bite!" she commanded.

He obeyed whole-heartedly, and they took bite and bite about so that there should be no waste. They divided the *Sandtorte* to the last crumb. They were very thirsty, but it was too much bother to find water.

"Don't you wish you had two *Butterbrötchen* all to yourself?" Lenchen asked sleepily.

"Yes, rather."

But he did not really care. He was too nappy. He leant back against the tree and through half-closed eyes looked out over the earth. It was a dream—a real dream. Beyond the farthest mountain were great shining cities.

Of course they were on the top of the world. What

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was all that nonsense about Mont Blanc? He had never seen Mont Blanc. It was in a book. Books were stupid and dull—not real like this.

Of course they were all alone.

He felt a hand take his. Their hands cuddled together like little mice.

"I *am* sleepy, aren't you, Helmut?"

"No, not a bit," he declared valiantly.

Her dark head rested drowsily against his fair one.

"Dear Helmutchen!"

Of course there were fairies.

When he closed his eyes he could hear their distant mysterious murmur.

VII

He woke suddenly and violently, and even before he knew where he was he knew that the dreadful thing had happened.

Lenchen stretched herself and rubbed her eyes.

"Why—we've been asleep."

"It's gone," he said.

"What's gone?"

"Our day."

She laughed sleepily.

"But there's to-morrow. Grandfather says to-morrow is also a day."

"Not for me. I—I'm going home, Lenchen."

She did not cry out or protest. He felt the warm, slack body pressed against his grow straight and rigid. She frightened him—she was so still.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to know. I didn't want to know myself. I thought—I didn't think it would ever really come."

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"Helmut—I—I shan't have anyone to play with."

"I shan't ever play again."

They did not look at one another, but stared unwinkingly ahead, their eyes strained wide open. The shadow of the gaunt pine had spread round them like a black stain. The peaks of the mountains stood out against the sky in sharp, cruel outline. It was as though a silver veil had been rolled up. There was no more mystery. The warm, mid summer murmur had died into cold silence.

In the witch's cottage a red eye winked at them malevolently.

"Oh, Helmut—Helmut——"

He turned on her with a choking little cry.

"I can't—I can't believe it. To-day was to be always—always. I *can't* go back. I don't know what to do. If only I could run away somewhere. They're sending me away to a crammer's, where stupid, bad boys go—they told me so just now, and they'll stuff my head full, like a Strassburg goose, till it splits. No one ever fails, my uncle said. But I shall. My head hurts now when I try to think of things. And it will get worse. And they'll laugh and make fun—and I shall try harder. Then I shall fail just the same. I shall have to be a common soldier for three years. And when I come out there'll be no place for me, my uncle said, nowhere to go. No one will want me. My people will be too ashamed. They want to be so proud—they want me to do better than anyone else. They're always expecting things—and I can't do them. I can't—I can't."

She pressed her burning cheek against his.

"But they're your people; they must love you, whatever happens."

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His teeth chattered. He made a convulsive effort to hold himself still.

"I—I don't know. If only one knew why it all was—what it all means, but we can't find out. There doesn't seem any—any sense in things in going on. What's it for? One isn't happy. Not boys like me. Clever, splendid people like Prütwitz, or bad, strong people like Kurt, they're happy. Because people love them—or they're frightened. But people like Karl and me, we're no good—we can't pass our exams; we can't ever be happy—all our lives."

"But God made everyone," she said with childish solemnity.

"He couldn't have done—not if he was God. There'd be no sense in making Karl—just to kill him."

"Karl killed himself. The Pastor says it's almost the wickedest thing of all."

"My mother said it was the only thing he could have done—because he'd disgraced himself. People in our position mustn't live after they're disgraced, she said."

He turned drearily towards her, and they stared into each other's eyes like antagonists who will not let each other go. Hers were hot with indignation. He began to falter under them. His mouth quivered. On the heels of this ruthless philosophy came the slow, bitter tears.

And in an instant she was holding him to her with all her strength.

"Oh, Helmutchen, you're such a little, silly boy. And I'm littler, and not clever. I can't do lessons—not fine ones like yours. I shan't ever be able to do anything wonderful. I shall just work in the fields as

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long as I live. But I'm happy—and I know you're silly. I know—I know—I know."

He clung to her sobbing, fighting her with all his pitiful wisdom.

"You say that because you're just a girl; you don't know about things—about life—and exams. You don't understand. They haven't taught you."

"No, they haven't!" Fiercely she tossed up her small, round head. "And they never shall. I don't know who *they* are, but they must be wicked people—and I wouldn't believe them, not if they were right. Everyone ought to be happy. I'm happy. I will be happy. When things are sad I shall know that God wishes it, and that in the end it will be all right. My grandfather and grandmother are old people, and they're not clever a bit, and they've never done anyone any harm. But they're always smiling and jolly. That's because they love each other and are good. People make jokes about them, because they're so old and love each other so much."

"Perhaps loving people makes it worth while," Helmut said wistfully.

"Why—and I love you, Helmut."

He was silent for a moment, looking away from her, red to the roots of his flaxen hair.

"And I love you, too, Lenchen."

They did not speak again for a long time. Suddenly all the storm and stress and tumult had gone. They sat like little birds, huddled close together, shoulder to shoulder, their arms interlocked, and gazed peacefully out over the world beneath them. It was so still that there seemed to be no one else alive. But the shadows were rising fast up the mountain-side. Only the peaks were still golden. Westward red clouds hung like smoke over a

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smouldering furnace. The glow was on their young, upturned faces.

"P'raps, when you're gone you'll forget poor Lenchen," she whispered.

"No—I never will. I've never had anyone before—only Heini and Fritz Schnäützchen. And they burnt Heini, and Schnäützchen is so old he doesn't care any more. There'll never be anyone else but you."

"And then when you're a big man you'll come back and marry me."

"Yes—dear, dear Lenchen."

"And then everything will be all right. Hans will let us have the little Bauernhaus, and we'll live there together and be happy. You won't have to be clever or worry about lessons any more. We'll keep pigs and fowls and work in the fields with Hans. And when we have little boys and girls of our own they shan't ever be unhappy like poor Schultz."

"No," he said gently.

"It's only a few years, Helmut. And they go faster and faster. It isn't long to wait. I'm nine and you're nearly eleven—let's say quite eleven. We could marry when you're twenty, couldn't we? That's only nine years. To-day nine years you'll come up the path to our house and I shall meet you on the doorstep and say: 'Here I am! How big you've grown, Helmut!'"

He laughed shyly.

"And I shall say: 'How pretty you are, Lenchen!'"

"And you won't have to mind when they bully you or laugh at you in class—or when you're just a common soldier. You'll just say to yourself: 'It doesn't matter. It's all silly nonsense. I must be

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good and kind.' And then you must count up the days and see how long it is before you can come."

"You won't love anybody else, Lenchen?"

"Never, never! We shall be so happy."

He believed it. He believed everything. It was as though sunshine had come after a long, bitter night and thawed the hard unbelief in his heart. Ever since she had said: "I love you, Helmut," everything had been clear to him. He knew that after all he would go back and not even be afraid. He would face the Geheimrat and the Geheimrätin—and Kurt—and his mother's and father's grief and shame. He was glad now to think that they couldn't kill him. He would go through with the crammer's. He would be a failure, but he would be happy.

"We're engaged people, aren't we, Lenchen?"

"Yes—of course we are."

"And engaged people give each other things. Look, I brought this for you." From his blouse he produced the crushed and faded nosegay. "And there's a poem inside. I wrote it—all by myself—for you."

"Oh, Helmut, how sweet of you! I shall keep it always, until you come."

They looked deep into each other's eyes, smiling.

Afterwards they walked soberly down the mountain path, hand in hand. It was dusk in the forest. They were two shadows in a temple with high, mysterious columns that lost themselves in a whispering dome. But far away between the dark stems of the trees they caught the red glint of the sun.

Where the path ran into the Roman high road a

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gaunt crucifix stood up blackly against the evening sky. There they stopped, facing one another.

"You will come back, Helmut?"

"Yes—I'll come back."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She choked back a big sob.

"God bless you, Helmut, darling."

"God bless you, dear Lenchen."

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him and wept. And he held her close to him and comforted her.

PART II

CHAPTER I

I

"HELMUT!"

She bent over him, shielding the candle-light with her hand. There must have been a draught from the open door, or else her hand shook, for the thin flame waved to and fro distractedly like a red rag in the wind. "Helmut!" she whispered again. It was as though she did not really want to wake him. He lay there, on his back, half-dressed, a trousered leg sprawling out from underneath the grotesque white *plumeau*. His mouth hung open and he was breathing noisily. Of a purpose she kept his face in shadow. "It's time, Helmut—four o'clock," she insisted in the same constrained undertone.

He did not move, and she took him by the shoulder and shook him—reluctantly, almost with repugnance. He stirred at last and blinked up at her.

"Oh, all right, don't fuss, I'm getting up."

He wriggled his shoulder free and turned sullenly to the wall. She put the light down on the dressing-table in the midst of a sordid disarray of half-dirty collars and crumpled ties, and went out as she had come, noiselessly, as though from the presence of grave sickness. In the dining-room the Herr Amtschreiber waited for her. He, too, was half-dressed. His braces trailed over his slippered heels, and his thin, fair hair stood fretfully on end. Like the furniture in the stiff, comfortless room, he had faded

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and grown old and hopeless. He did not turn as his wife entered, but stood warming his withered hands against the porcelain walls of the stove.

There were breakfast things laid out ready on the table. She re-arranged them, setting out the solitary cup and saucer, covering the steaming coffee-pot, clattering nervously.

"Is—is he getting up, Clara?"

"I think so. He's awake."

"Did he seem all right?"

"He was dazed. But he understood."

"He mustn't miss the train."

"No, that would never do."

She gathered her flannel dressing-gown closer about her heavy body, shivering with sudden cold, and came over to her husband's side. They did not look at one another. With the sound of movement in the adjoining room they started and grew tense, listening, wincing at each blundering, uncertain footfall.

Presently the sounds grew nearer. There was a finality about them, and the two grey figures braced themselves. As the door opened the Herr Amtschreiber turned, rubbing his hands in an agony of cheerfulness.

"Ready, Helmut?"

"As ready as I ever shall be."

He was in fact fully dressed, with hat and overcoat. But his clothes, at best ugly and clumsy, had now a wretched, debauched look as though they knew their own hideousness and were ashamed past hope. Their wearer tossed down his cloth-covered suit-case and came over to the table. His eyes were doggedly lowered; in the lamplight his face glistened with a grey moisture.

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His mother fussed over the breakfast things.

"You'll be late, Helmut. It would never do to be late."

He muttered something and sat down and began to eat. They hovered about him uneasily. They made little sentences—about his train, about the weather, about his journey, but he did not answer, and they fell silent. Perhaps he felt how terribly they loved him—how terribly they longed for him to be gone. He gulped at his food as though it hurt his throat. At last he stood up, pushing back his chair.

"I've had enough. I'd better be off."

They both took a deep breath, nerving themselves for the plunge. Something that the Herr Amtschreiber was trying to say twitched at the muscles of his face. His wife laid her hand with a hard, stiff tenderness on the boy's arm.

"I've packed all your warm things, Helmut."

"You must write regularly—and let us know."

"Oh, yes, of course."

The words tumbled suddenly from the Herr Amtschreiber's lips.

"Head up, Helmut. Mustn't be too down-hearted. After all, if you do your duty, in whatever sphere—if you are honest and obedient and loyal, no one has a right to reproach you; at least, we don't—we—your parents."

He broke off waveringly. The boy lifted his heavy eyes. His mouth quivered as though he, too, were on the verge of some outburst of appeal, of gratitude, or love. But the hard, strong hand on his arm tightened so that he felt the impress of each separate finger.

"Only we do ask—we do expect, Helmut, that

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you will remember who we are; that you won't bring shame or disgrace on us. Last night, Helmut, an official's son—it doesn't do. Think of our position. If your poor father were forced to retire now—and perhaps next year he will get an Order."

His eyes were swollen and defiant.

"Well, what have I done? We had a spree at the Erbprinzen? Why shouldn't I have my fling like everyone else? Kurt did. Kurt had a good time."

"But, don't you see, that was different? Kurt had got his commission——"

"And he'll have a good time often. And I shan't ever again."

"You mustn't take it like that, Helmut. It's wrong."

But their protest flickered out. They watched him helplessly as he gathered up his things. They were unhappy. They ached with sorrow for him, but it was a dull ache that had no voice. And mixed with it was an antagonism—a brooding resentment. They could not forget that he had broken the sacred tradition that governed all their life.

"Well, good-bye." He kissed them both, roughly, hiding his face. "There—you don't need to worry. I won't do anything. I promise. I—I'm awfully sorry—about last night—and everything. It's hard on you—I know."

They clung to him. But their agitated affection could not hide that they were glad that the parting had nearly come; glad that it was so early and that they would not have to accompany him to the station—that no one would see him go.

"Try and please your under-officer, Helmut. He's the man that matters."

"I'll try."

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He shook himself free from their futile, fluttering hands. He was brutal in his impatience. They called after him as he stumbled down the dark stairs, but he did not answer.

"Glück auf, Helmut ! "

They went back slowly to the stuffy dining-room. It seemed to have grown smaller, greyer. There was something poignant about the half-finished breakfast—the empty chair. They could almost see the gesture with which he had pushed it back from the table.

The tears rolled down Frau Felde's cheek.

"Ach, Hermann, if it had only been different ! If he had only tried a little more ! What will people think ? All my family are at least officers in the Reserve——"

"If one does one's duty——" the Herr Amtschreiber began listlessly, without conviction.

"Our poor Helmut ! "

And yet they drew their breath more easily now that he had gone. It was all over. For two years there would be nothing to hope or fear. There would be no more bitter hours of anxiety, wondering whether or not Helmut would again be *sitzen geblieben* in the fatal *unter-secunda*. That question was settled for all time. And those wretched months when he had "*bummeled*"—the "rest-cure" which was to establish him as a pardonable invalid in the eyes of incredulous, spiteful colleagues and their no less incredulous and spiteful wives—that was over too.

All the humbugging and pretence finished with.

They were disgraced. But it could never be worse than it was now and at least their disgrace was out of sight.

Frau Felde wiped away her tears.

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"After all, perhaps he doesn't care. He hasn't much feeling—no class honour—our poor Helmut. And as Herr Bernhard said—there is always America or the colonies——"

The street door clanged. The sound hushed them. It was so dolorous and final. They sat still and listened to the slow, heavy footsteps pass down the sleeping street into silence.

II

There were twenty of them in the carriage. They were packed so close together on the hard wooden benches that they could scarcely move their arms, and the atmosphere was thick with smoke and pungent with the smell of human bodies. They were men of many classes, many conditions. Between the burly, smooth-jowled peasant in his black broadcloth and mole-skin waistcoat and the narrow-chested youth in his town shoddy there was but one thing in common—the gay ribbons that streamed from their caps and adorned the handles of their walking-sticks. That marked their common destiny. For all that they looked about them with suspicion, with a dull distrust, trying to measure each other without self-betrayal.

The big peasant produced an embroidered velvet case and selected a cigar deliberately. He alone had an air of assurance—almost of arrogance. The eyes turned dumbly in his direction and he met them with a bovine stolidity.

"Have one!" he said.

They gave a rumbling growl by way of answer. The case went the round and they helped themselves. Alone the boy seated in the far corner refused. He

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shook his head, staring out of the window. His neighbour laughed and nudged him.

"Don't, then. So much the more for me."

And slipped a second cigar into his breast pocket.

Matches were struck. There was a general stirring, a clearing of throats, vague, inarticulate noises verging on speech. The peasant blew great rings of smoke into the thickening atmosphere and squared his shoulders.

"I'm from Titisee," he announced. "My name is Veit Thomas. My father owns the Schlangenbauern Hof on the hill-side. I am joining up with the 45th at Berghausen. My father was Gefreite in the regiment forty years ago."

They stared at him respectfully. His neighbour took courage. He even swaggered a little.

"My father is Oberbahnwärter at Rastatt," he said. "It's not a bad little nest. One can have a good time there. And there's Baden-Baden when one wants a spree."

Their tongues were loosened. They began to vie with each other. They made their announcements with a kind of defiance as though once and for all they were trying to establish their position. Alone the Grossbauer's son listened in unmoved silence.

"My father owns forty acres and twelve cows and fifty pigs," he said finally. "For two hundred years my people have owned the Hof. That's better than stupid titles."

The man with the narrow chest took up the challenge. He threw out his hands in an angry, nervous gesture.

"Two hundred years!" he shouted. "That's just like a peasant, sticking to the same place, never moving, never changing. It's you that stop pro-

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gress. You block our way. We can't move because you're always there, like a drag on the wheel. I'm a mechanic. I'm from Mannheim. I tell you *we* move—we know what's going on in the world—ay, and we see that things go the right way. We working men—we're the future, that's what we are, and one of these days you'll have to wake up or clear out, you damned land-hogs!"

The peasant stared contemptuously, but he was slow-witted or perhaps he did not think it worth while to answer. The mechanic leant forward and tapped the boy opposite on the knee. There was something feverish and perpetually angry about the man. His sunken eyes were penetrating, bitter and intolerant. "And what's *your* pedigree, comrade?" he asked.

The boy turned slowly, as though waking from a dream. All eyes were fixed on him for he alone had not spoken. Something indefinable separated him from the rest. They felt it and waited loweringly. He flushed scarlet.

"My name's Felde," he stammered.

"That's not saying much. What's your father?"

"An official."

"Oh, well, we're all officials more or less. Speak up, comrade. Don't be so damned superior."

"My—my father is Amtschreiber at Karlstadt."

Someone whistled.

"Herr Je! Einjährige also?"

"N-no."

There was a silence. He looked from one to another with a kind of defiance that was also a sort of apology and appeal. But their faces were hard. They considered him dully, curiously, as though he belonged to another race.

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"If your father is Amtschreiber why aren't you Einjährike?" the Mannheimer persisted pitilessly.

"I failed. I couldn't pass the exam."

"Then you don't need to be so damned superior. I hate the middle-class crowd worse than the peasants, but a bourgeois who is a fool into the bargain——!" He spat viciously. "Don't you give yourself airs here, anyhow," he threatened.

Someone intervened pacifically.

"Let's have a song, comrades."

"Sing yourself."

The proposer, who obviously considered that he had a voice, started "*Deutschland über Alles*," but the Mannheimer broke out with a loud oath.

"That's enough of that, anyhow. Haven't you got two ideas in your heads, you sheep? '*Deutschland über Alles*!' Ach, you make me sick. Every cock crowing on its own dirty muck-heap. I tell you what—we, we proletariat, we've had enough of that stuff. What's Germany to us—or England, or any blasted country? We workers hang together all over the world. The Proletariat over the Capitalist and the Imperialist and all the other scoundrels—that's my song."

The Grossbauer narrowed his small eyes arrogantly.

"I've heard of your sort. We don't breed them up our way. God be praised. I'm a Kaiser's man. I'm for the Empire."

"You would be. You look it. But your day's coming all right. We've had enough of you and your blasted Kaiser!"

"You'll talk like that to the Herrn Offizieren, eh?"

"Yes, I will! I'm not afraid. I don't care for

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any man alive. I'll say what I think straight in their ugly faces. I'll put the fear of God in them. I've got six million comrades behind me, I tell you, and if they try any monkey tricks——"

"Ach was! Silly stuff!"

The Mannheimer leant forward, shaking his fist.

"You call it silly? You wait—you Reichsgesinn-ten! You try another war on us. Then you'll see. It's we who've won your wars for you. But we're not going to win any more. We're not going to butcher our brother proletariat to fill your greedy stomachs. No! There'll be no more hip-hip-hurrahing—no more of your precious 'Deutschland über Alles!'"

His peaceably inclined neighbour produced a bottle from under the seat.

"Have a drink, comrade?"

The storm died down. The bottle went the round. There was a grunting and smacking of lips. They wiped their mouths on the backs of their hands and winked at each other with a stupid new-found friendliness. The Grossbauer drank to the "Old Regiment" and the Mannheimer to his brothers over the whole world in mutual toleration.

"Your turn, my Hochwohlgeborene Herr Felde!"

The boy hesitated. His face was wet with nausea. But they were watching him. The Mannheimer bowed mockingly. With a silly laugh he snatched the bottle and, tilting it, drank to the last evil-tasting dregs.

CHAPTER II

I

"RAUS! RAUS!"

A door burst open. With a frightened jerk the muffled snores and stentorian breathing broke off and an instant later the darkness writhed convulsively in the throes of returning consciousness. Distracted groping legs waved ludicrously from the upper berths; bodies tumbled to the floor like heavy, drunken spiders shaken from their webs. The voice grew angrier, flinging itself into obscure corners like a terrier hunting out a skulking rat.

"Raus! Raus, ihr Lumpen!"

Then someone snapped an electric switch.

It was as though a crude searchlight had been turned on to a rudely disturbed ant-heap.

Helmut had already lurched to his feet. He was blind with sleep, and yet he was sure that he had not slept. He was sure he had heard every sound in that endless night. But a fretful drowsiness had distorted the animal sighs and groans, the twitching of over-exhausted bodies, the cursings of uneasy sleepers into a nightmare which persisted. Even now the reality was unreal. He hardly knew where he was. But he did know that there was something imperative behind that voice, driving him to hurry—to hurry desperately.

He fumbled into his clothes. His fingers were stiff and swollen and unmanageable. His body

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ached. With the hours the straw sack had seemed to wear to nothing under him, leaving him on the bare board. The chilly stuffiness of the narrow, ill-ventilated room had crept into his very bones.

"Now then, bustle, can't you?"

The Gefreite bellowed his way up and down the dormitory. Helmut's neighbour, struggling with an unfamiliar uniform, lurched against him and they cursed each other childishly. A tense excitement possessed them all. Half-naked men, their backs glistening wet under the light, ran hither and thither, the Gefreite hunting viciously at their heels. But there was purpose in the apparent confusion—a tight-jawed, ruthless order that reckoned every breath and gave no quarter. They waited one behind the other at the washbowls. So many seconds for each man. Neither less nor more. The Oberbahnwärter's son from Rastatt stood in front of Helmut. Perhaps the irritable watching eyes troubled him—perhaps washing itself. He was slow and clumsy and the line behind him muttered and fidgeted. They jostled each other. A hard-knuckled fist poked into Helmut's ribs. A suppressed frenzy of impatience ran like a fire over dry grass. Suddenly Helmut kicked out savagely. The heavy military boot jarred against the boy's shin and he staggered back whimpering, half-blind with pain and soap.

They took no notice of him. They jostled Helmut into his place.

"Get on with it—you——"

"My bayonet—someone has taken my bayonet!"

They found time to snigger. It was the company's *Einjährige*. He stood aloof, already dressed in his well-cut uniform, his long aristocratic face drawn into lines of petulant indignation.

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The Gefreite, watch in hand, shouted at him.

"Damn your bayonet! Who the devil wants to steal your bayonet?"

"I shall complain to the Herr Feldwebel——"

"Complain, then! Get the whole company into trouble. Try it on, that's all, my fine gentleman!"

The victim, on the verge of a furious outburst, composed himself, shrugging contemptuously.

"Here's five marks on the table. The man who returns my bayonet can have them."

They appeared to take no notice of him. He continued to dress with an effective deliberation.

Helmut flung himself into his tunic. He knew the routine now. At a certain moment a certain button or one was lost. At a certain moment one had to be ready at one's bed-side. Then the clothes would be tossed out, shaken, replaced, tucked in with a meticulous accuracy almost as though to the beat of grim music. But they were too new to their task. The Gefreite, like some exasperated sheep-dog, yapped at their heels, tearing down their failures with a snarling fury.

"You dirty swine! One can see what pigsties you came from. Wait, though—I'll show you——"

But he himself had the look of something hunted.

Gradually the pandemonium subsided. The orderly of the day appeared staggering between two pails of steaming coffee. The soldiers dipped in their metal bowls and drank noisily, their eyes fixed on the Gefreite whose lips moved with the seconds.

A heavy step sounded in the corridor.

In a flash the emptied bowls vanished into the lockers. The *Einjährige* snatched up his missing bayonet from under the bed and was buckling his

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belt just as the new-comer loomed up in the open doorway.

"Stramm stehen!"

It was quite still. The whirlwind had dropped each man, each thing in place. They stood in a straight row with blank faces and fixed, staring eyes, the middle fingers of each hand pressed anxiously to the outer seams of their trousers. The differences that divided them had somehow been rubbed out. The Gefreite and the Oberbahnwärter's son had faded into each other's shadows.

"Everything in order?"

"Zu Befehl, Herr Feldwebel!"

The burly figure moved heavily down the motionless line. The Herr Feldwebel was red-faced, bull-necked. The fair, carefully tended moustache lay flat like tiny spread fans against the full cheeks. His eyes were small and sharp. They flashed over each man like a hungry knife, eager to cut.

And suddenly Helmut's heart seemed to stand still in his breast. The top button of his tunic—it had come unfastened—or he had forgotten it. He felt it like a loathsome sore which spread and spread over his whole body. And it was too late. If a snake had been about to strike him he could not have moved to save himself.

Fear again. The old fear of an examination or of a forgotten button.

The Feldwebel stopped short. He seemed to swell up.

"You call this being in order!"

The Gefreite, standing stiff as a ram-rod at his elbow, threw Helmut a glance of bitterest dislike.

"Verzeihung, Herr Feldwebel——"

"A pretty sight for the Herr Leutnants. A

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slovenly lot. This sort of thing can't go on. Two hours' extra drill for the whole platoon. I'm not here to do your dirty work for you, Gefreite. Verstanden?"

"Zu Befehl, Herr Feldwebel!"

"Right about!"

The stiff line was violently galvanised into life. Twenty-five men pirouetted on their heels, clumsily, unsteadily, like marionettes dangling from an as yet unaccustomed hand.

II

The little Lieutenant Müller turned up the red collar of his great coat, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and stamped his feet. He made a funny grimace as though he were reassuring himself as to the continued existence of all his features.

"If I were you," he jerked out good-naturedly, "I'd let the beggars go. Two hours' parade step, dear God in Heaven! No joke. Bones must be rattling like castanets. Not to mention my feet—nearly frozen off."

As he spoke an icy wind chased across the Kaserne Hof and flung itself on the luckless Platoon No. 12 as though it meant to bowl them over. The rest of the company had long since been dismissed, and in the empty square the handful of men had a forlorn, deserted look.

The second officer shrugged his shoulders. He was tall and sparsely built, and the movement accentuated his resemblance to some aristocratic, temporarily inactive bird of prey.

"We have a certain reputation with regard to new-comers," he remarked. "Having so recently joined, you are perhaps not aware that we reckon to be

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through with our raw material three months sooner than any other regiment, cold feet notwithstanding. Each regiment its own foible, nicht wahr, liebe Kamerad? "

The question was faintly stressed as though it covered a second meaning not altogether agreeable. The little lieutenant flushed hotly so that his face was even redder than it had been before.

"Naturally. Let us proceed by all means."

Oberleutnant von Steuban motioned to the Feldwebel, who stood at a respectful distance, and an order was roared across the Kaserne Hof. The first man in the line jerked forward alone. He moved like a mechanical toy that is not quite in order. In harsh rhythm his legs shot out, almost at the horizontal, the feet comically pointed, and came down rigid, with a jarring thud that shook his whole body. It was the Mannheimer. His thin face had a sullen, resentful look. But he was trying desperately. His uniform, a size too big for him, flapped about his meagre body, and his bayonet, dangling from an over-ample belt, danced like a possessed thing at his side.

The Feldwebel kept pace with him, gesticulating vociferously, as though he had been the trainer of a troupe of performing animals.

Two paces from where the officers stood the man came to a halt—abruptly, nearly throwing himself off his feet. The mechanism, apparently, had run down.

Oberleutnant von Steuban fixed his eye-glass with a fur-gloved hand.

"Herr Gott! Bow-legged, too. What do they mean by shifting these deformities on to us? Haven't we any line regiment for such stuff? The next, in Heaven's name! "

In due course the next arrived at his comrade's

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side. The rest followed. Though it was a bitter November morning and they wore no overcoats they dripped with sweat. Their knees shook under them.

Helmut came last of all. It was like the old days when he had tried to walk past the Oberlehrer's desk without stumbling. His legs did not belong to him. They did what they liked. But he was taller than his companions, better built, and, though he did not know it, there was a grace in his slim, young body.

When he stopped at last the beads of perspiration rolled down his cheeks to the corners of the smooth, quivering upper lip. He held himself tense for the abuse that was to come to him.

To his amazement the little lieutenant nodded.

"Es geht schon. Stramme Kerl! The makings of a good soldier there, eh?"

Helmut heard. And he could not help himself. He glanced towards the speaker, flushed with happiness, almost smiling.

"Stramm stehen!" the Feldwebel roared indignantly.

"In our regiment we do not indulge in good and bad soldiers," von Steuban observed. "We have soldiers. That is enough. Our idea is conformity—uniformity." The glint of malice died out of his wooden face. He yawned.

"And the fellow has such a damned unmilitary expression," he added.

III

They judged that he was now ready to go out into the world. At least he could meet an officer without bringing discredit on the discipline of the whole army. For hours together they had set him to prac-

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tise the encounter, and he was as near perfection as the Herr Feldwebel Kahn considered possible for a raw recruit. It was an exact business. At three paces distance you stiffened to a ramrod, threw out your chest, jerked up your hand to your cap, the elbow well out, your head half-turned; with your eyes fixed immovably but expressionlessly on your object you proceeded another six paces, by which time you were calculated to be well past and out of sight. You then relaxed smartly, and the crisis was over.

The only real difficulty lay in counting your paces.

Helmut stood by the Kaserne gates. He had longed hungrily for this moment. It had seemed to him that if only he could get away from those perpetually watching eyes, from the proximity of other human bodies, he would be happy. Ever since he had thrown wistful glances at the broad road outside. He had thought about it at first and gradually it had become a symbol of old factories that as the years passed had grown wan and dim as ghosts. There had been something splendid and adventurous about it—as though perhaps it led to a new country. But now he stood there and realised that it was just an ordinary road after all. To the right it led to Mannheim; to the left it ran through the insignificant garrison town. He knew the town already by hearsay. There were a few dubious shops, a couple of public-houses, multitudes of bare-footed children playing in the gutters. There were other things, too, barely hinted at, though with winks and sidelong glances. He had not understood and no one had enlightened him, because, after all, he did not belong—he was an outsider.

There was nowhere for him to go, nothing for him to do. It was odd how isolated he felt. He

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had hated those jostling, ubiquitous bodies, but in their midst he had been warm and assured. There had been no choice, no doubt, no thought or questioning or remembrance. He had been a mere animal among other animals that suffered fatigue and hunger, that enjoyed food and rest.

Now for a few hours he could choose, think and remember. And it was as though a secret prop had been cunningly withdrawn so that he should know its strength. His golden freedom had turned to lead in his hands. He would have been glad if the Feldwebel had come out and shouted to him to go here or there.

Two *Einjähriges* swaggered out of the barracks. One of them was the boy from Helmut's platoon. He wore a fine new uniform that fitted his well-grown body creaselessly. There was an air of insolent well-being about them both.

Helmut watched them wistfully as they stopped for a moment to draw on their white gloves. The desire for companionship, for a word with equals who spoke his language, who would not look upon him with distrust and hatred, almost choked him. A wild impulse seized him. He would go up to them and say: "Excuse me, Herr Kamerad, my name is Felde. My father is Amtschreiber at Karlstadt. I was in the Gymnasium—if I might be allowed——"

The little rehearsal died in his heart. He would have to explain. He thought of how they would look at him, of the contempt they would hide behind a glacial courtesy. He went red with shame. Much better that they should think he was just one of these *Gemeine Kerls* who stole bayonets and exacted ransom. In any case, in five weeks they would go into their own quarters. The period

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of disgusting intimacy with the herd would be over.

The two young men walked on. It was evident that they had a purpose. Possibly they were invited out. The *Einjähriges* were in great demand amongst such gentry as the little town boasted. They did not so much as glance at Helmut as they passed. But the two sentries watched him. Their dull faces were expressionless, and yet he was sure that they were laughing at his indecision. He had turned away, shamed into some sort of initiative, when a voice hailed him and he looked back willingly, almost thankfully.

A soldier who had come out of the house opposite the barracks beckoned to him.

"Hi, comrade, here are you off to so fast?"

"I don't know."

"Well, that isn't a very interesting place to get to," the soldier grinned at him good-naturedly. He was a squat, red-faced little fellow with sly, twinkling eyes. "I suppose you don't know your way about here yet?"

"No, it's my first day out."

"H'm! Well, it's a dirty little nest. It's better for the Herr Offizieren, they can skip over sometimes to Mannheim to their wives—or such like. And they've their Casino." He nodded towards the red-brick building across the way. "Fine doings there, sometimes, I can tell you. I'm orderly to Oberleutnant von Steuban and I know. But you can't blame 'em. A place like this is enough to bedevil a saint. No womenfolk—can't get a decent place for them to live in. What women there are—well—villagers and such like—they're more for our sort, eh?"

In a sudden revulsion of feeling Helmut longed

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again to be alone. He was conscious of something significant in the man's manner, as though what he said was only a preamble. And yet he was friendly, too. And friendliness had become so rare. He turned and walked at his companion's side.

"I suppose you're in your second year?" he asked, and hardly knew how much he tried to roughen his accent into tune with the man's broad dialect.

"To be sure. Shouldn't be an orderly otherwise. It's a soft job. Mind you put in for it when your time comes. There'll be a regular competition for a smart, good-looking chap like you. And you can get your man, too, with a bit of luck."

"I shouldn't have chosen von Steuban," Helmut remarked.

The man laughed.

"Oh, I don't know. One can get round him. He's a hard nut, of course. But then he's bound to be. If he isn't there's sure to be a harder nut on top to crack him. We're a fine regiment. The smartest in the division. We cut up best at the last manœuvres. The inspecting General said so. We've got a reputation to keep up."

"I'd choose Leutnant Müller," Helmut considered.

His companion stopped short to stare at him. His twinkling eyes had grown round and stony-looking.

"Well, if you think that, keep your mouth shut, that's all. We don't want any Müllers in *this* regiment. Till two years ago we didn't have even an Einjährige less than a count. And now, Pfui Teufel!" He spat to emphasise his disgust. "Müller, forsooth!"

Helmut was silent. His whole life taught him

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that the man's judgment was irrefutable. And yet the little lieutenant had said, "Fine fellow!" and had even smiled at him.

"He seemed—rather decent," he defended doubtfully.

The soldier shrugged.

"Maybe. We don't want him. That's all. He can take himself over to the 114th. They have Müllers like the sand on the sea. Have to number 'em, so I'm told. Well, we shan't keep ours very long. We had another like him last year—God knows how he got in, but we got him out again double quick. Praised him out. The Colonel wrote such glowing reports of him that nothing would satisfy Berlin but to have him at Headquarters." He burst out laughing. "And we'll get our little Müller out soon—freeze him out—or kick him out—somehow. Pass auf!"

Helmut did not answer. Though he saw as clearly as anybody how out of place the little officer was in such a regiment, yet the thought of his humiliation made him feel tired and dispirited. Suddenly his companion nudged him. "Got any money, comrade?"

He started.

"Why, yes, a few marks."

The man nodded. His eyes narrowed craftily. He looked round at Helmut and there was something unexpectedly bestial in the expression on his round, rosy face.

"That's good. After all one has to have a good time somehow. If one knows the ropes it isn't so bad, even in this damned nest. I tell you what, comrade, you ought to make friends—join up with a lot of other fellows. And a girl—there are some jolly

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fine ones wanting to be knocked off the perch by a fellow like you."

They had come back to the gates of the barracks where a little group of soldiers had gathered, evidently waiting. Helmut recognised them. There were men of his platoon among them—the peasant Thomas and the Oberbahnwärter's son and the Mannheimer. They were watching Helmut and his companion with a sort of subdued excitement. The latter nodded towards them.

"All right. Wait a bit. Look here, comrade, I'm taking these fellows to a place I know—just outside—it's a sort of club—none of your silly Sing Vereins. It's a private concern. One can have a fine time there. I tell you about it because you look a decent sort. And look here, I'll introduce you to a girl—a real high-stepper—it won't cost you much. A fine fellow like you——"

The boy stopped short. A red wave of shame and anger blinded him. He could have struck his companion. And yet he was afraid. Fear galloped in his blood. The man had plunged his hand down into the depths of him and outraged the innermost dweller—dragged it to light—the sleeper from whose threshold he had turned again and again in awe and terror, as though he knew that on the manner of its waking depended his whole life.

And now this man, with his dirty, ruthless hand——

The Oberbahnwärter's son beckoned good-naturedly.

"Come on, Felde!"

He liked the little fellow. He was kindly and bore no malice. Helmut remembered remorsefully how he had kicked him. And these men were his

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only companions. His lot was bound up inextricably with theirs. If he went with them now he would never be alone again. There would be no more distrust and hatred and persecution. He would be one of them.

"Come on, comrade."

But he held back.

"I—I don't think I will. I'd rather not."

Intolerably virtuous and superior! He flinched guiltily under their eyes. The Mannheimer laughed derisively.

"Leave him alone. Let him go his own way. We don't want him, the beastly bourgeois spy!"

The soldier considered Helmut for a moment. The good nature had gone out of his red face. It was stiff with spite.

"Dumme Junge!" he spat out.

They left him there. He watched them as they went on their way towards the town. Well-conducted, decent fellows they seemed. He heard them laughing.

When they were out of sight he went back slowly through the barrack gates.

IV

Thereafter war—pitiless and unscrupulous—was declared against him. They hated the *Einjährige*, but he was a bird of passage who could buy respect, and would one day be able to enforce it. They could torment him, but his utter contempt for them lifted him out of the range of their spite. But Helmut, a despised member of an alien caste, who would never be able to buy or enforce anything, who had lost his right to trample on them, was fair game. Now that

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he had refused their tentative offer of comradeship their resentment became implacable.

Articles of his equipment vanished daily. In his presence they would fall into the cruel, isolating silence of persecuting children, or nudge each other and titter and whisper. They jostled him from his place at the wash-bowl so that his unreadiness at inspection brought him into incessant disgrace. At night a teasing whisper rose up about him. An obscene word would drop through the darkness together with his name and a subdued waspish hum of laughter.

Most of all the Mannheimer hated him. The man lived on hatred—burned with it. It was as though he knew that Helmut, alone among his comrades, recognised the pitiful contrast between his violent denunciations of authority and his grotesque efforts on the parade-ground. Shame drove him to a persistent challenge.

"You wait!" he vociferated as they sat polishing their accoutrements after the evening drill. "You wait! I'm biding my time—that's all. One doesn't bang one's head against a brick wall; one mines it and blows it up—suddenly. Let them keep on at their monkey tricks with me. I'll dance their tune so long as I choose to. So much the worse for them. The time's coming when we proletariats will set them dancing. I can wait until then." Then he looked at Helmut with his sunken, furious eyes. "Do you hear that, you bourgeois swine—I can wait." Helmut made no answer. The man stood up violently, and lurched across the room. "Can't you speak? Drop those damned superior airs. I won't stomach them. What do you mean by not answering. Do you think I'm not waiting, eh?"

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"Yes."

"You think I'm frightened, eh?"

"Yes, I do."

The threatening hand dropped. The Mannheimer went back to his work. But that night there was no whispering. The sudden blows rained on Helmut out of darkness and almost unbroken silence. But they were sparks that flying wildly touched at last on the vein of gunpowder that ran strangely through his docility.

They had expected a victim. They had loosed a madman. His strength was convulsive, fearful as an earthquake. The black invisible circle broke before him. The bodies that clung to him, seeking to drag him down, were wrenched off like a cluster of blood-gorged insects. His whirling fists struck horribly into soft, unguarded faces. The darkness became his ally, for he had no friends to spare; but his enemies, bewildered by the tumult, fought among themselves, cursing and groaning in a rising hysteria of thwarted malice.

And then suddenly panic seized them. They fell away from him, scuffling like frightened rats back to their holes.

So he stood alone in the centre of the dormitory, his body stripped naked, bloody and bruised, his chest heaving in great breaths of rage and triumph.

He waited. The silence was absolute. No one challenged him. He had won—and he was alone for ever and ever.

Stiffly he felt his way back to his berth. He buried his face in the rough pillow, hiding the last bitter tears of boyhood.

CHAPTER III

I

It was the Grossbauer's son, Veit Thomas, who told them. He had been elected *Stubenälteste*, and thanks to the arrival of fat hampers from the Hof above Titisee, there existed between him and the Herr Feldwebel a subtle understanding highly agreeable to both parties. Whoever else suffered injustice in the platoon, it was not the big peasant. Nor for that matter did he escape justice, for even the Feldwebel could not stop the inflexible working of the machine, and therein lay its strength. But petty persecution, the additional burdens which lay in the *unter-offiziers'* power to bestow, never fell to Veit Thomas's lot. Moreover, he was the sure channel for all the rumours and scandals of the regiment.

"Yes," he said, as he leaned against the lintel of the dormitory window and watched the Oberbahnwärter's son polish his boots for him with moody discontent, "fifty miles is what they're going to squeeze out of us. And if we don't play up it will cost our little officers fifty bottles of fizz—a bottle for every mile. You'll see how they'll hound us along!"

The Oberbahnwärter's son lifted a white face from his task.

"Fifty miles! Why, I've never done twenty. Fifteen knocked me all to bits."

"And there are to be no stragglers either." Thomas nodded maliciously. "Each straggler means

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point less for the winners. Don't you worry, when your legs fail they'll kick you along!"

There was a moment's heavy silence.

"They say that General von Dering is to act as referee," the Gefreite began, not to be outdone in superior knowledge—"and the Emperor himself is interested. Of course, it's all unofficial, but you know what *that* means. If we win the Herr Oberst can begin thinking about himself as Brigadier. If we don't, he'll wake up one morning with a top-hat on. There's no room in this world for people who don't pull a thing off."

"And what do we get out of it either way?" someone asked.

"Sore feet!"

An exasperated murmur assented.

"What the devil do they mean by this? Is it because they get drunk at a mess dinner, and brag and gamble. Let them gamble with their money, but not with us!"

The Mannheimer sprang up violently from his berth where he had been crouching with his thin, burnt-out face hidden in his hands.

"And if you were half men you wouldn't stand it," he shouted at them. "If I had some of my comrades here we'd soon put a stop to it. We'd strike. We'd have some of these fellows up against a wall."

Veit Thoma raised himself up and came across the room heavily, menacingly.

"You stop that!" he said. "You don't have that sort of talk here. I'm a Kaiser's man. Besides, it's all gas! When the time comes your wretched legs will step out like the rest."

They laughed. The Mannheimer glared

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round the face of angry, contemptuous faces. He shook his fist futilely.

"You!" he said between his teeth. "You will."

II

So it came to the knowledge of the 4th Platoon that the Grenadier Regiment stationed at Karlstadt had backed themselves to reach a certain village midway between the two garrisons an hour sooner than the 45th, and that the officers of the 45th had sworn to have their men quarters ere the dust of the Grenadiers showed on the high road.

There was no official announcement. The reason for the forced march concerned men as little as its destination concerns the engines of a ship. Nevertheless, the whole temper of the regiment changed. The exasperating monotony was gone like mist before a strong wind. The brooding, peevish faces of the officers lit up with purpose. They moved with quick, firm steps. The men grumbled, but now for the first time beneath the unfeeling character of their training there showed the stealthily forged chain which linked man to man—officers to men. Willing or unwilling, hating or indifferent, they were a whole. The herd instinct, deliberately fostered, blazed up, consuming the individual with his indolence and cowardice to ashes.

The Colonel harangued the whole regiment on parade. The staccato sentences warned them that there was to be no straggling, no falling out.

In the chill drizzle of a winter's morning they swung, four deep, through the barrack gates. Each man carried his full campaigning kit—overcoat, loaded haversack, and rifle. The captains on horse-

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back at the head of their companies, the subalterns, on foot with drawn swords, saluted the grim, watching figure of their Colonel.

The villagers, standing sleepily in their doorways, waved to them. The band played them out merrily.

They marched on, singing. The first ten miles was nothing to the rawest recruit. The rain, soddening their heavy overcoats and trickling from the rims of their helmets, was an old enemy, worse hated than the sun, but as yet their blood was warm and their muscles supple. Nor was the pace set sharper than usual. It was not speed that was to bring them victory.

They sang. When one company wearied, another caught up the refrain. To the curious marked rhythm of their songs they rolled the miles behind them.

They looked for the midday rest. It did not come. At two o'clock they knew that there was to be no halt. They ate their rations as they marched. And now for the first time there dawned on their stolid faces an almost animal look of fear and trouble.

The drizzle had become a downpour. The soaked overcoats slopped heavily against their knees. The course of their blood, slackening in weariness, could not stand against the penetrating cold which crept up their limbs. Songs gave place to uneasy mutterings—mutterings to silence.

The grey afternoon faded into twilight—night itself. Like a black serpent the regiment wound its way down into a narrow valley flooded with swollen mountain streams. The first company churned the slush to a sticky paste in which those who followed slipped and staggered drunkenly. Under-officers stumbled up and down the line, flashing their electric-torches into the dripping dead-white faces, cursing

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with voices broken with fatigue. Blows fell in the darkness—passively received by bodies almost dead to feeling.

The officers marched on immovably. They carried themselves erect, with expressionless, insolent faces, as though they stood above the reach of hunger and exhaustion. Now and then a word of command slashed through the soaking obscurity like the cut of a whip.

At first Helmut had marched willingly—almost thankfully. These long marches were a strange relief to him. Then his loneliness seemed less poignant. One could not be happy or unhappy. One could not even think. One was just a body that marched and marched. And afterwards one slept without a dream.

But now a dull anger smouldered in him. With every leaden mile it gathered fierceness. It was as though it fed on his wretchedness, blazing higher and higher. He hated the men who, for an idle boast—born of their own boredom—had doomed them to this torture. He hated the stupid, will-less bodies that lurched against him, throwing him from his stride. He could have murdered them. It gave him pleasure to thrust them brutally back into their places. His inflamed fancy conjured up delicious visions of a machine-gun mowing them down in swathes.

A light flashed. It was the little Lieutenant Müller. Weariness had pinched his round, boyish face into unfamiliar lines. There was a comic splash of mud on his cheek.

"Kopf hoch, Kinder—only another mile or two—Kopf hoch!"

He had come back to say that; he had left his place just to encourage them—when every step counted.

Towards Morning

Helmut wondered at the strangeness of his own voice.

"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant!"

The lieutenant nodded and smiled.

"Stramme Kerls!"

He vanished, splashing into darkness.

The Oberbahnwärter's son marched at Helmut's side. Whilst daylight lasted he had kept up a sullen silence, but now that the night hid them from each other he weakened. Perhaps he forgot who was his companion. But at heart he was a kindly, good-natured little fellow who only ostracised Helmut because it was the easiest thing to do.

His voice sounded faint and distant.

"Do you think it will ever come to an end, comrade?"

"Oh, yes, it can't be much further. The Herr Leutnant said so. Is anything wrong?"

"I don't know. There's a pain under my ribs. If I stopped I should fall down."

"Give me your rifle. I am stronger than you."

"No, no, comrade."

"No one will see. Come, do as I say."

The boy sighed.

"Thank you, comrade, thank you."

Suddenly an electric wave thrilled along the staggering line. They straightened up like men waking from a stupor. The ranks closed up. Somewhere ahead a light glimmered.

"The signal—they've not arrived yet."

"In sight."

"Fifty miles—twenty-three hours."

"The Grenadiers, they say, two miles off."

An under-officer ran down the column bellowing fiercely.

Towards Morning

"Sing—sing, will you, or——"

They sang. It was like a miracle. The faint, sickly light of morning showed in the east as they thundered into the village—victorious, at parade step, caked in mud, with blank faces.

The General took their salute from the steps of the little inn. He greeted the officers who stood about him, stiffly erect, their hands to their helmets. Soaked and mud-splashed as they were, they retained an invincible immaculateness.

"Ich gratuliere, meine Herren. Magnificent record. The Emperor will be delighted."

It was fortunate that the Oberbahnwärter's son stood in the second rank. No one, except the two men on either side of him, saw him fall. He slid down quietly, rather comically—like a sawdust doll whose stuffing has run out.

They dared not move to help him. And it was only five minutes later, when the General had finished his harangue, that they knew exactly what had happened.

III

From the inn across the way came music. The Grenadier band, which had come by train, was playing a song from *Der Walzeraum*:

"Mädel fein—mädel mein
Giebt sich drein, sagt-nicht nein——"

In the intervals they could hear voices, laughter. They imagined the click of glasses, the warm, delicious flow of red wine from dusty bottles, the golden sparkle of native Sekt, the lights and glitter and warmth.

Towards Morning

They lay there, seeing and hearing these things with their inflamed souls. There was no sleep. Their bodies were agony to them, a dull persistent agony which kept them tossing and twisting in the straw with the muffled sighs of exhausted cattle. Someone had tried to kindle a fire in the corner of the barn, and they had huddled round the pitiful blaze, holding their stiff, blue hands out to it in a kind of supplication. But the wood was wet, and the flames shrivelled and grew pale, throwing up a film of smoke through which the circle of faces showed dim and unreal. Now the light died out wholly, and each man was alone.

"My feet—my feet——"

The sudden whimper stung them to fury. They were worn threadbare. Their outer defences were gone. Their raw nerves quivered and twitched. They were ready to fall on each other for a word.

"Curse you! Shut your face! Do you think you're the only one?"

"I've got feet too, haven't I? Bloody feet—stuck to my boots they have. I heard the blood squelching."

"And that damned haversack—I can put my fingers in the ridges on my shoulders."

"Some people seem to think they've got all the trouble."

"Well, why don't they stick us where we could get dry? It's this cold—it b-bites into one—like a dog's tooth."

"Much they care. Dirty devils the whole lot. If there was a war, I know whom I'd plug first."

"Animal torture—that's what it is!"

"Bah! D'you think they'd let their horses rot in the wet and cold?"

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"Hark at them over there with their blasted music!"

Someone giggled hysterically.

"That's out of the *Walzetaum*. I heard it last year at the Summer Theatre. It's a fine song." He began to sing in a cracked falsetto:

"Niemand kann tanzen wie meine Frau——"

They screamed at him, shaking their fists.

"Stop that noise! How is one to get to sleep?"

"Well, we're not sleeping, anyhow. Might as well be jolly."

"To-morrow they'll march us back."

"Not me—not on my bloody stumps. I'll see them damned."

"Listen! They're toasting someone now."

"It's the Regiment." The speaker assumed a satirical nasal intonation: '*Meine Herren—das vier und fünfzigste Regiment Kaiserin Augusta—es lebe hoch!*' "There, can't you hear 'em? That's the Herr Major speaking. I can see his turkey-cock face from here."

"Herr Je! The Regiment!"

An awed silence fell upon them. The storm sank. They sat still, listening. The Grenadiers' trumpeter sent a deep thrilling fanfara into the night, and then a wave of subdued applause came across the street to the huddled listeners.

"Drinking *our* healths!"

"Don't you believe it!"

"Why not? We're the Regiment, too, aren't we?"

"They may well! Fifty miles in twenty-three hours!"

"An infantry regiment of the line whacking the Grenadiers—ho—ho!"

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"They've sent a telegram to the Emperor."

"Who cares? He hasn't got blisters as big as hen's eggs on his feet."

"I saw the Emperor once—at Wiesbaden—with his staff. Herr Je! How they shone! The Emperor rode down the line of troops. He said, 'Good morning, soldiers!' and they shouted back, 'Good morning, Your Majesty!' I thought I'd be glad when I was a soldier, too."

"My grandfather talks about the old Emperor. He cries when he talks about him—he's very old now. The Emperor pinned the Cross on his breast with his own hands. That was at Versailles in 1871. The Cross hangs on the wall in our sitting-room, but when grandfather goes to meet his old comrades in the Kriegerverein he wears it."

"Ah, yes, those were great days."

Their voices were growing clearer. They seemed to be coming out of some thick, muffling fog.

"These are great days, too. People used to make fun of us Germans. They don't laugh now."

"No—they're afraid."

"The lieutenant says that one day we shall beat them all. God means us to—because we're stronger and braver and can suffer more."

"That's why they put 'God with us' on the coins. The Lord God loves brave men."

"My grandfather says it's a glorious thing to be a German soldier and to die for one's Fatherland."

"When I go home on leave I shall wear my best uniform. In church people will look at me. They will nudge each other. 'There's young Brentfeld. He's in the 45th—the regiment that did fifty miles in twenty-three hours and was congratulated by the Emperor.' My girl will be so proud. My brother

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was rejected and his girl broke it off. She was ashamed."

They smiled in the darkness, each man with his own vision.

"Ach ja—it's a grand thing."

A new voice broke in querulously.

"Soldiers are just cannon-fodder. They, over there, I tell you, they're not thinking about us."

"But it was we who did it," he was answered fiercely. "We did it!"

"We damn well had to—they made us!"

"Something made *them*, too. They're human—sort of. Besides they couldn't have made us—not if we hadn't meant to."

"Yes—that's queer. Look here, I'll tell you something: I meant to drop out. I made up my mind. I didn't care. What's a few days' cells compared to this? But when it came to the point I had to stick it. I had to—something sort of got hold of me."

"Yes, that's it, one can't stop. One can't get out."

They brooded for a while over the thing which had possessed them, which possessed them now in spite of all their misery. Then a voice broke out again:

"Little Schneider went all the way, and he'd never done twenty miles."

They stirred uneasily in their straw. They began to whisper as though they were afraid of being overheard.

"He dropped, though, when it was all over."

"They—they say he's dead!"

"Heart failure."

"He knew he couldn't do it; he told me——"

"But he couldn't drop out either."

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A sigh rose out of the darkness.

"Well, that's life! We Germans have got to be strong. The weak chaps have got to be weeded out somehow."

"A good thing too. Up at the Hof we don't breed pigs off a rotten stock. We kill 'em off. Well, this'll be something to tell the old man. They didn't do fifty miles like that in his day."

"Ach, now you're beginning to brag! A minute ago you were ready to shoot 'em for what they've done to us. And what are you bragging about? Because you've stuck it like a horse that goes till he drops to please the beast that rides him? Because they've squeezed the life out of one of us, is that why you're inflating yourself, Veit Thomas? You whipped hounds! You growl, but you like licking the boot that kicks you. You'd cheer a monkey so long as he wore a helmet and pranced to a military band. Pfui! You make me sick!"

They turned savagely towards the voice.

"Hold your tongue! We know all about you."

"You're a brave fellow when there's no one looking."

"Tell us about the proletariat, and how you're going to make people walk on their heads."

"Why don't you do as you say?"

"Yes, spit in the Herr Feldwebel's face next time you see him."

"Then, p'r'aps we'll listen."

They jeered hysterically. For he had laid hands on the thing that justified and glorified their misery. If it was not a holy, splendid thing, then they were madmen. Their world would collapse about their ears. There would be nothing left but their bleeding feet and aching limbs.

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The Mannheimer did not answer, and they sank into a brooding, exasperated silence.

Helmut lay with his face in his arms trying to hide from the mingled stench of straw and dirty bodies and saturated clothing. The wet cold had eaten through to his bones, but in the very heart of him there was still a flicker of life—of something that thought and reacted to exterior stimulus. And strangely enough it was the Mannheimer who kept the flame alive. Helmut had seen the would-be rebel's face in that brief firelight. They had exchanged glances—significant, deadly. The sunken, burning eyes had stared back into his with a tragic triumph—with the look of a man who has come through shame and anguish to some releasing, expiating purpose.

"You wait!" it had said. "You wait! You shan't jeer at me again."

In the dead quiet of the village street the thud of marching feet sounded ominous. It came nearer—it stopped to the rattle of grounded arms. The listeners rolled over with a stifled cursing.

"The patrol!"

The door flew open and a lighted lantern flashed searchingly over their dazed faces. An under-officer followed on the heels of the lieutenant who had evidently left the feast to carry out this last irksome duty. The splash of mud on his patent-leather boots enhanced their brilliancy. He brought in with him the warm scent of wine and cigars.

"Auf stehen!"

They lurched stiffly, with agony to their feet—all but one. And he did not move. He sat with his back to the wooden wall, his arms clasped about his knees, his face a white wet mask in the light. A

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queer little smile twitched at the corners of his tight lips.

The under-officer stumbled over the straw towards him.

"Get up! What's the matter with you? Are you drunk or mad or what?"

"I've had enough. That's why I'm not getting up. I've been driven like a beast. In the name of my suffering comrades over the whole world, I protest."

The voice was high-pitched and quavering. It was terror-wracked. Yet he sat there. The under-officer made a movement of sheer helplessness. He was more than half afraid of that set, wild-staring figure. Only madness could explain it. And he had met madness before—after the manœuvres.

The lieutenant motioned him imperiously aside. He was young, and the cruel march and deep drinking had inflamed his temper. He was going to make an example—prove to himself perhaps that he could uphold his authority like a veteran.

"Get up!" he said quietly and dangerously. "Get up!"

The Mannheimer glanced across at the pale line of tense, watching faces. He sought out Helmut, the same smile of childish triumph about his mouth. He did not move.

"Get up! Do you hear? For the last time——"

The lieutenant kicked the crouching figure with his delicately-shod foot.

Then—grotesquely, like a jack-in-the-box, released by its spring—the Mannheimer bounded up. His arms whirled. His flat, open hand struck full across the lieutenant's face.

It was as though a hidden mine had been exploded

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under their feet. In the falling dust and debris they heard the shrill rasp of steel—a light flashed up. But before it fell, Helmut had lurched between. He flung himself upon the frantic soldier, bearing him down, pinning him to the ground. In a strange, convulsive embrace they held each other.

When at last they were dragged apart the lieutenant's sword had slipped back into its sheath.

It was quite still now. They dared not look at one another. Something had been shattered—something that had seemed fundamental and inevitable. For the moment authority, rank, and caste were wiped out. They were like men struggling out of the ruins of a fallen house, asking themselves: "What has happened? Who are we? What remains?"

There was disaster in the dark, evil-smelling atmosphere. Only the Mannheimer seemed unconscious of it. He looked about him vaguely, seeing no one, until his eyes met Helmut's, and then his brows twitched with a kind of pathetic puzzlement.

The lieutenant's hand lay clenched white on the hilt of the sword he had drawn too late. He was a mere boy now—a boy who had played clumsily with a machine that had no mercy on clumsiness. He knew—and the men whom he commanded and the under-officer who stood baffled and horror-stricken beside him knew—that there could be no mercy.

The red stain was spreading over the bloodless cheek. Twice he tried to speak. His lips quivered with the effort. They could almost hear the sob in his throat.

And at last it was the under-officer who blustered out an order.

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Two soldiers from the patrol closed in smartly on either side of their prisoner.

"Vorwärts!"

The door slammed to, and they were again in darkness. They crouched down in the wet straw, listening.

The interminable waltz-music from across the way flowed over the dull, receding footsteps.

CHAPTER IV

I

THE next day they were marched back.

It seemed that the light in him had gone out finally. He had become a mere physical organism that moved at a word and stopped at a word, that hungered savagely for food, and rest and for vague, unnameable things. The desire of them welled like newly-hatched serpents at the bottom of the darkness.

He stood at the gates of the barracks and stared brutishly in front of him, brooding over nothing. He still suffered, suffered even acutely, as a paralytic suffers in the first hours of atrophy, but he did not know that he was suffering. His mind registered no emotion. He could not have taken a decision, could not have moved suddenly to save himself. Yet when a grey-coated figure turned in at the Kaserne Gates he stiffened sharply, and the middle finger of each hand found the outer seam of his trousers in a lighting reaction.

Lieutenant Müller glanced at him and stopped.

"Why, you're the fellow I've been thinking about. We want extra help at the Liebesmahl to-night. You—you seemed to me the sort of fellow who knows how things are done. Do you think you could lend a hand without disaster?"

"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant."

"Good. Report yourself to the mess sergeant. Tell him I sent you."

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"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant."

The other did not pass on. He stood there with a set, earnest expression on his pleasant face. It was almost as though he were trying to overcome a certain embarrassment.

"Look here," he jerked out suddenly. "You don't belong in this galère. I can see that. You're educated—different. Why aren't you an Ein-jährige?"

"I failed—three times, Herr Leutnant."

"Ah, yes—yes." He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his great-coat, shivering a little. "Pretty rough for you, eh?"

Helmut did not answer quickly. He shrank from the question as from a surgeon's knife. He was afraid, resentful. Why was this man, this officer, trying to make him feel and remember, when he had almost forgotten? He stared stolidly.

"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant."

"Ach, um Gotteswillen, answer like a human being for once. It's my duty to know something about you. I asked you a question, Felde."

Helmut set his teeth sullenly. This stranger could probe and dig as much as he liked. He should not get through. He should not hurt. If there was a living nerve left he should not find it.

"I don't know what the Herr Leutnant means." Then his interrogator looked at him—so straightly, with so much goodness that he faltered. "It was bad at first, Herr Leutnant—one gets accustomed——"

"Hardened, you mean. And that's bad. These other fellows—they're living above their own level, some of them. They'll come out all the better for it. But you'll be roughened—as the best must be. It

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won't do. Remember, you've got to go back to your own life."

He had found the nerve—at one sure glance. And it was alive. It hurt incredibly. It was like coming back out of a narcotic to the bitter knowledge of pain and disfigurement. And yet under those loyal, friendly eyes, Helmut came back gladly. There was something sweet—almost voluptuous in this surrender to the other's will.

"I haven't anything to go back to, Herr Lieutenant."

"Your people?"

"They don't know what to do with me. They're ashamed."

"You must make them proud. And, anyhow, there's yourself. If yourself isn't ashamed——" He broke off. Perhaps he remembered who he was, what his brother officers would say if they heard. Perhaps, just for that moment, he, too, was afraid. And for just so long they stood there, staring at each other, a pace distance between them; two boys, almost of an age, oddly alike with their fair, round faces, divided by a gulf which, by the law of caste, they must not cross. The lieutenant lifted his head sharply.

"Next year you can be my orderly, if you choose," he said. "Then I could make things easier for you. I could lend you books and things—help you. You'd be in my quarters. Only"—a youthful sternness hardened his glance—"only it's for you to choose. You'll have to show that you want it. You know what I mean. If you let yourself go now, in a year's time you'll be finished. You've got to keep your soul alive. It will be hard going. You'll have to hold out alone."

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Outwardly they were just officer and man. Helmut had not moved. He stood rigidly at attention. But all the thwarted affection, all the passionate idealism and hero-worship of youth was in his throat as he answered :

"Herr Leutnant—I'd do anything—put up with anything—I'd be glad—if only there was something to work for—I'd——"

He could have fallen on his knees and kissed the other's hand. He would have died for him. Perhaps the little lieutenant knew, for he turned away, blushing hotly.

"Until next year, then, Felde ! "

"Until next year, Herr Leutnant ! "

"And to-night you serve in the mess ? "

"Zu Befehl, Herr Leutnant ! "

A faint, rather bitter smile twitched at the corners of the officer's mouth. He nodded and passed on quickly. But Helmut stood and watched him until the slight, grey figure had faded like a wraith into the dusk.

II

The dinner was over. The mess orderlies moved about briskly, clearing the long table, carrying liqueurs and coffee. Chairs were pushed back. The harsh ceremoniousness of the earlier hours was relaxed. Men lounged comfortably in their places. A fragrant amethyst veil of smoke rose up like incense, through which a portrait of Bismarck looked down inscrutably.

"No, it's a pity our good comrades from Karlstadt cannot take a beating," Major von Schönau remarked. "All this fuss about detail strikes me as

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unsportsmanlike. Because some fellow drops down with heart-failure and another goes off his head doesn't alter the fact that we beat them. If it had been a question of manoeuvring for a position in war-time we should have won."

"Undoubtedly." The Colonel at the head of the table shrugged his broad shoulders. "But you know what Majestät is—it's the all-round standard that counts. Two links in our chain snapped, and it will go against us in Majestät's opinion. You will see that I am right."

The conversation drifted down the table to the subalterns.

"Good Lord, all that swot for nothing!"

"And to-morrow the old grind again."

"Drilling blockheads that can't tell their right foot from their left, and don't know how to use a pocket-handkerchief!"

There was a laugh.

"Rehearsing a play that never comes off!" the red-faced Major muttered bitterly. "That's what soldiering means these days."

Hauptmann von Theobald patted him on the shoulder with a slim, white hand.

"Just wait a little, my friend. It will come."

"You think so? Ah, yes, for our son's sons. Meantime we rot here in this God-forsaken hole—in a ghastly monotony of routine that is idiotic unless it leads to war; not even able to relax in it, with not a soul to speak to but ourselves—not even able to live with our families because no family could be brought up in such a place. Rotting in soul and mind for nothing. To no purpose. And when we've given our best years, when we're too old, too petrified to be anything else, we get a blue envelope dropped on our

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breakfast table, and we know that Majestät is grateful for our services but has had enough of them."

A silence answered the bitter tirade. The younger men half-smiled, but there was an uneasy, irritable look on the faces of their seniors. The one commoner among them leant forward eagerly.

"The truth is that soldiers, unless they are fighting, are sort of organised lunatics," he said. "We spend our days doing things that have no sense in them. If we have a talent for anything intelligent or beautiful we have to suppress it and suppress it in others. Von Liebenau there has a voice that would have taken him all over Europe and he has to crack it on parade. Von Theobald is an artist, but if he dared to paint a picture that was worth anything he would be suspect as a soldier, and quite rightly, because nobody with an artist's mind *could* do futile, ugly things intelligently. It is the same with everything. A soldier is simply a negation."

They were silent a moment, turning to him with an over-emphasised consideration.

"Except when he is fighting," von Steuban observed with his Berlin drawl. "You made that reservation yourself, mein Lieber. When he is fighting he is the high-priest of his country. And we shall fight. This is only the preparation."

"But when—whom, in heaven's name?" Müller exclaimed.

"Soon—and perhaps everybody. You cannot go on sharpening a sword for ever. If you do the time comes when it will snap in your hands. Our Government knows that. There are signs already that if we do not fight soon it will be too late. At present we are firmly welded—of one mind—but to-morrow—who knows?"

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"Why should we fight at all?"

There was again the silence, the invisible stiffening. Von Steuban laughed.

"Our friend is trying to tell us that we are anachronisms as well as lunatics and negations," he said. He leant his elbow on the table, his long chin in his hand. "He forgets that it is quite open to every man who feels that he has wasted himself to take off the King's coat to-morrow."

Müller moved sharply in his place, and the eyes of the two men met and held. The red-faced Major interposed noisily.

"Well, and who is our next whetstone to be. France? We should beat her, eh?"

"Aber Glatt!"

"Russia?"

"A tottering Colossus."

"Both together?"

"So much the better."

"England?"

"Ah!"

They considered the point gravely, dispassionately. The Colonel broke the silence with his harsh, strong voice.

"The English are great fighters," he said. "They are brave. But they are stupid. No, that is inaccurate. They like to seem stupid, and they have pretended so long and so well that the appearance is almost as good as a reality. To be efficient in England is to be bad form—not quite the gentleman. It shows too much eagerness, too much interest. The English people like to bungle a thing two or three times just to show that they don't really care. Then they put their back into it. When they've won they say: 'You see—we can't help winning when we try.'"

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Of course, it's expensive, but then that just emphasises the inexhaustibility of their wealth."

"If they blunder against us——" von Schonau put in.

The Colonel smiled.

"Exactly. Then that will be rather different. That will be very expensive indeed. Very painful, even."

"Nevertheless they are to be taken seriously. They are sportsmen."

"And we are in deadly earnest. One cannot be both. To be a sportsman one must be sufficiently detached to see the other side of the argument. In war one must be passionate. War is not a game."

"They are tough," von Schonau persisted.

"So are we. They don't think so. They think they are the only people who can be defeated without being broken. They are mistaken. So much the worse for them."

"It will be a bitter struggle."

"Undoubtedly. For them it is life or death; for us it is a question of now or later."

The Major lifted his liqueur glass.

"Well, may it be soon—before they push me on to the scrap heap!" he said, twinkling good-humouredly.

"Like poor Leiprandt," von Theobald remarked. "He sent in his papers last night—he cried like a child."

"He *was* only a child," Müller said quietly. He still leant forward a little, his hands clasped as though he were struggling for self-possession. His eyes sparkled, and there was a feverish colour in his cheeks. Across the table von Steuban watched him,

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smiling faintly and steadily so that his lean face was like a mask.

"He did the only possible thing," he said.

"Why?" Müller flashed out. "What was his crime? A delirious soldier struck him. Was that his fault? Why should his whole career be blasted——"

"The Herr Kamerad is very full of whys to-night," von Steuban interrupted amusedly. "One might almost imagine oneself in the Reichstag listening to a Socialist interpolation. True, the blow was not Leiprandt's fault, though a more experienced officer might have prevented it. But the blow having been dealt he had only one course open to him—he had to punish instantly—effectively. He should have run the fellow through."

"A madman? Damnable!"

"Ah, you think so? Yet the King's regulations are explicit on that point. Leiprandt failed to protect his uniform and his honour."

"An honour that is so easily insulted is no honour at all."

A ripple of movement passed down the length of the table. An undercurrent, invisible on the flat surface of their boredom and discontent, had none the less been carrying them forward to the edge of a cataract. Subconsciously, at least, they had felt this moment coming. They stiffened to meet it, turning their imperturbable faces to the two men who waited on each other's move in unmasked antagonism. And in their attitude there was something prepared, expectant, almost eager.

"One would think our friend had been studying Bebel," von Steuban murmured. "If one could think such a thing of a Prussian officer."

"Meine Herren—meine Herren!"

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But for once the harsh voice carried no authority. Lieutenant Müller had not moved. He spoke quietly, very distinctly.

"I did not surrender my intelligence or my conscience when I put on the King's coat," he said. "I say it would have been damnable to have killed a sick, exasperated man. A law which insists on such an act is a bad law." Perhaps he knew then—suddenly—that they *were* prepared. He looked about him, meeting their expressionless, unflinching stare with a flash of understanding. "Ah!" he said under his breath.

And now von Steuban moved. He had been hovering—waiting. He dropped like a hawk.

"Then in your opinion, Herr Kamerad, the life of a swine of a Socialist is worth more than the honour of your regiment?"

"I respect life more than a fetich."

"Ah, our uniform is a fetich? Is the Herr Kamerad sure that the fetich fits him?"

Their voices were hushed, and yet in the tense stillness they sounded over-loud, brutal. Von Steuban waited. The young man opposite him had turned white to the lips, but he had not flinched. So they remained facing each other for an interminable minute.

"You meant that, Herr von Steuban?"

"I have said nothing that I regret."

"Von Theobald, will you act for me?"

The good-looking captain assented courteously.

"But, with pleasure——"

Müller rose. He stood for a moment in his place, very straight and slender in the close-fitting uniform. His face was faintly flushed again, but pinched and old looking.

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"With your permission, Herr Oberst——"

He bowed and they bowed back to him, gravely, ceremoniously. Helmut held the door open, and he passed out, leaving behind him an unbroken silence.

An orderly caught Helmut up as he went down the servants' steps of the Casino.

"The Herr Leutnant Müller says you're to drive out with me in the *Krumper-Wagen*," he panted, "to-morrow morning at daybreak—seven o'clock."

Helmut nodded dully.

"All right."

"You can come round half an hour before and help me harness up," the man added with a wink.

"Yes—yes—I'll come."

But he hardly knew that he had spoken. He was listening to a voice that said over and over again :

"And we'll get our little Müller out soon—freeze him out—or kick him out—somehow—you'll see !"

III

And so, when the first grey light broke over the distant hills, the ramshackle old *Krumper-Wagen* with its occupants rattled over the cobbles of the *Kaserne Hof*, and two tired sentries presented arms. A few minutes more and the little town was rubbing its sleepy eyes behind them, and they were out in the open country.

It had been raining in the night, but now the grey mantle of clouds was wearing thin. In the air there was a keen sweetness; a breath of spring blew over the furrowed fields.

Helmut sat on the box beside the orderly. The carriage was open, and in his mind's eye he saw the

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lieutenant, wrapped in his long military cloak, with his two companions facing him. He could hear their voices, calm and untroubled, the casual everyday comments, as though nothing had happened—as though nothing ever could happen.

The Zigéuner-Wald lay about a mile outside the town. Helmut knew it well. A clearing had been cut through its heart, and twice a week they were marched out there for musketry practice. Although it was quite small and insignificant to Helmut, it had always seemed the most beautiful wood in the world. When he had first seen it it had been a green pool in the hot ugly plain, and he had run into it like a thirsty desert-wanderer, drinking its shadow gratefully. Then the autumn had come and burnished it to a bronze shield. He remembered the pungent flavour of decay, the mellow tang in the mists that had hung over the golden floor. And now in the last days of winter only the fir trees remained clothed in their old dress. They stood out sombrely—a little plebeian—amidst the austere loveliness of barren branches.

Another carriage had arrived before them, and a group of men waited at the foot of a great beech tree. They stopped talking as the new-comers alighted, and two of them detached themselves from the rest and came forward, saluting.

Lieutenant Müller's companions advanced to meet them, and they stood together in calm consultation. Presently both parties returned to their places. The lieutenant slipped off his cloak and tossed it into the carriage. He wore a grey Letewka, and the short, close-fitting jacket made him look even younger.

He nodded to the soldier on the box.

"You won't forget, Johann?"

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"Ach, nein, nein, Herr Leutnant—but God forbid——"

He smiled at both of them. His blue eyes lingered rather sadly on Helmut and for a moment he seemed about to speak, but he said nothing and turned and joined his companions.

It was very still. Yet when one listened every now and then a sound fluttered up—the soft jingle of harness, the thud of an impatient hoof, the crackling of a twig under some mysterious tread. The moisture from the overhanging branches dripped with a silver-toned splash on to the dead leaves. A pale rain-washed sunlight shone behind the grey fretwork. It painted the stark stems of the trees with luminous colour. One saw for the first time that the sap was rising.

There was life in the stillness, the first stirrings of a sleeper.

The orderly moaned to himself.

"Oh, Gott! oh, Gott! if it is only not my young gentleman—so'ne brave, junge Herr——" The thick tears rolled down his cheeks, and he rubbed them away shamefacedly with his rough, red hand. "He is so good to me. And look here, he gave me a letter, before we set out—to me—as though I had been a friend. He might have given it to a brother officer, but no. 'Johann,' he said, 'Johann, you'll post this if it's necessary. It's to my mother.' Look, here it is. I carry it in my tunic."

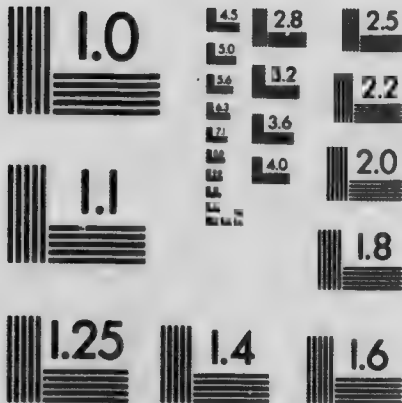
Helmut glanced at the inscription, "To the Frau Doktor Müller." He thought: "If we had lived in the same town my mother might have known her. They might have talked together about their sons and of the plans they were making for them."

He began to imagine what she was like. Grey-



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haired and little, grown hard, perhaps, with life, like his mother. Or happy and pretty. Yes, surely the mother of the lieutenant would be happy and pretty, and proud too that her son should be an officer in the 45th amongst such fine people. She was asleep now, dreaming no evil, not knowing what the fine people were doing to her son.

The orderly gripped his arm so that his fingers met through the flesh. An instinct must have warned him, for a full minute passed before the thud fell. They sat rigid, staring blindly. And now there was no other sound in the whole world. A second thud came—after an eternity of time, and it was quite different. It was deliberate, ominous. It echoed interminably.

"Oh, Gott! oh, Gott! my young gentleman—my poor young gentleman!"

Suddenly Helmut noticed a tiny sparkle of green amidst the dead leaves. In a few weeks the children would come here and gather *Maiglöckchen*. He remembered how he and his mother and father, and Heini Schnäützchen had gone out to gather *Maiglöckchen*, and how his father had explained things to him.

"You see, the sap is like our blood——"

Two officers strolled out from among the trees; they were still talking calmly. One of them motioned to Helmut and his companion, and they jumped down and began to close the carriage.

Helmut knew then.

But he had known from the beginning.

And presently two more officers followed, and they carried the lieutenant between them. Behind, at a discreet distance, walked von Steuban with his friends and the regimental doctor. They, too, were

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talking. It was as though they had come back from a day's sport.

Helmut saw the lieutenant before they laid him back amongst the cushions. He was pale but very untroubled. There was a little round hole in the middle of his forehead.

His comrades stood together for a moment.

"He fired high—deliberately——"

"That was his affair."

"I shall report myself at once at headquarters," von Steuban said.

Von Theobald bowed.

"You will permit me to accompany you. As Herr Leutnant Müller's second, I should like to assure the court that the proceedings were perfectly in order."

"Tadelos!"

"In every respect."

They saluted each other in mutual congratulation.

And so they drove the lieutenant home. The *Krumper-Wagen* bumped and rattled over the cobbles. It was a disgraceful old bone-shaker, and they drove with painful caution as though in its dark recess someone were asleep.

And Johann cried. The tears splashed on to his tunic and made big stains on the blue cloth.

But Helmut did not cry.

His eyes were empty—stupid-looking.

IV

There were five of them, with the red-faced soldier in charge, and they had reached a squalid, tight-lipped house on the outskirts of the town when Helmut overtook them. He had been running. His

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eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and his breath came in hard jerks. It was as though he had been trying to escape from someone.

"Wait! Wait!" he shouted at them.

They stopped, considering him with dislike and distrust.

"Well, what do *you* want, anyhow?"

"I—I saw you going along. I wanted—I thought—p'r'aps you'd let me come with you—I'd like to come."

"Oh, yes, and spy things out and sneak on us."

"No—of course not. I wouldn't. I swear it."

"You were too damn superior to come before."

"I know. I was a silly fool. I didn't realise. The fact is—it's—it's so lonely—I can't stand being alone any more. I can't. I can't."

His voice was high and strained. It made them laugh.

"Well, we don't want any gentlemen spoil-sports and pie-faces."

He came close to them. He winked. There was something horrible and pitiful about it—like a child copying an obscene gesture that it does not understand.

"I'm not a gentleman, or a pie-face. I'll prove it. I'll show you. Only I'm not going to be alone any more—won't. Only let me come too. Look here, I've got some money. I'll stand treat—anything you like—the whole lot of you——"

They grinned back at him, their spite against him gratified, not disarmed. They were equals now, more than equals, for he was cringing to them.

"Well, you've changed your tune and no mistake."

"Yes, I know. I've told you—I'm sorry."

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The door of the secretive-looking house had opened like a mouth, and an evil breath struck into the clean air, carrying with it a hoarse murmur of voices—a woman's high, hysterical giggle—the scraping of a violin.

"Want to be one of us, eh?"

"Yes—that's it—not alone——"

The red-faced soldier slapped him on the shoulder, blinking triumphantly.

"Well, come on then! Show what you can do, comrade."

They pushed into the dirty passage, arm in arm, and the rest followed, laughing and nudging one another.

PART III

CHAPTER I

I

HERR WALTHER VON STOLZING stood on the flower-strewn hillock and sang.

Sweeter and richer, quickening in the exultancy of love and youth, the pure tenor poured out into the entranced stillness. Hans Sachs, with happy Evechen on his arm, and all the sturdy mastersingers of Nuremberg listened from their raised pavilion. And mediæval Germany, gay and multicoloured as a rainbow, stood about them, a-dream, their banners furled in the quiet air, the deep under-current of the violins seeming to sing their hearts' accompaniment—hushed as yet, but rising like a tide.

Away in the distance the red towers of Nuremberg looked down upon the meadow scene—charmingly sinister—an ogre castle in a fairy-tale.

*"Huldreichster Tag
Dem ich aus Dichters Traum erwacht——"*

Faces shone palely, phosphorescently through the twilight—row upon row, tier upon tier, up into the deep night of the galleries, where their white glow faded and went out into blank shadow. They were masks, blurred, one like another, terrible in their simplicity.

A young soldier sat in the far corner of the second gallery. He held his face between his rough, red hands and drew his breath deeply, like a released

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prisoner drinking in the first sun-warmed air of freedom.

*"Durch Sanges Sieg gewonnen
Parnass und Paradies."*

And now the tide had risen to their lips. Dreamingly, unconscious of itself, the great chorus swept into the open, hushing its own strength, following the singer from afar to the last height. A wind arose, and the banners fluttered out. It was as though suddenly all joy and youth and springtime of the world were in their song.

The young soldier hid his face in his arms.

When he looked up again the crowd had fallen silent. A new voice sang to them, a new, more wonderful song. It was Hans Sachs. He stood alone on the top step of the pavilion—massive, rough-hewn as a rock—towering above them all. The glitter and gleam of colour faded before his grey simplicity. The victorious Stolzing was like a pretty gilded puppet.

"Habt acht! Uns drohen üble Streich!"

The baritone was a man's voice calling through the song of children. Its mellowness was velvet over steel. And in the music, love and springtime gave place to something valorous and sober and splendid, a proud warning—a call to high endeavour. The lyric sweetness of the *"Preislied"* came again, but now it was rhythmized to the strong, disciplined swing of a marching people:

*"—und wälschen Dunst mit wälschen Tand
Sie pflanzen uns in's deutsche Land.
Was deutsch und ächt wüsst keiner mehr
Lebts nicht in deutscher Meister Ehr!"*

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As though he could bear no more, the young soldier stood up, and strangely, terribly, the man beside him stood up with him—and then the whole theatre.

In absolute silence they stood there to the end, their white faces gleaming through the dusk.

When the curtain fell upon the last joyous, exultant scene, there was still no sound. No hand beat applause. Men turned away from one another, groping blindly.

II

Helmut lingered on the steps of the vestibule. The spell of silence had broken. The crowds pouring out from the Parterre-Logen eddied uncertainly, breaking into disjointed speech. But the deeper spell remained. They were like people moving in a dream.

An infantry lieutenant, slender and tall in his dark blue coat, stopped for a minute under the light. He laughed, playing the indifferent, but his eyes shone, and the hand resting on the sword-hilt was strained bloodless. And in a flash of memory Helmut saw him toss up the yellow cap of the Quinta and heard him send his boyish shout to the heavens:

"Long life to our dear Lord God—long life to Him!"

But Leutnant von Prütwitz did not look at the infantry soldier who stood stiff and expressionless as he passed. He caught his companion by the arm in an irrepressible burst of feeling.

"The luck of it! Think of it really coming in our time."

Old Doctor Roth hobbled out on his wife's arm.

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Rheumatism plagued him, but he gesticulated with a youthful fire. He glared at Helmut unseeingly, his eyes two points of white-hot passion.

"Yes, I am a doctor, a man of healing—but if ever one of these treacherous English fall into my hands—well, God help me to remember my duty, for I shall be sorely tempted."

"It doesn't matter what one does to the English," his wife said, heavily excited. "They are devils."

"They and their precious treaties! Much they care for treaties when it suits them."

It seemed to Helmut that all his boyhood passed him by—changed, deeply, painfully familiar. There was the Geheimrat grown stouter, carrying the massive shoulders more processionally than ever, the big, black moustache turned grey. He forced his passage through the crowd, like a big liner through a shoal of fishing boats, the lean Geheimrätin struggling in the backwash. His voice boomed over the confusion.

"Kurt had his marching orders a week ago."

He jostled Helmut indifferently. Even if he had recognised the figure in the clumsy infantry uniform he would not have spoken. He had Spartan notions of honour. There could be no common soldiers in his family.

A tidy little man with spectacles seemed to spring up under the Geheimrat's shadow. Helmut remembered him quite well. He had a big *Delicatessen* shop at the corner of the Karlstrasse, and Helmut and his mother had gone there every Thursday evening to buy their weekly supply of sausage. It was his son, the first tenor at the Münchener Hoftheater, who had sung Walther von Stolzing.

"They are going to exempt him," he stammered

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in breathless excitement. "He wanted to volunteer, but they couldn't let him. 'A great artist,' they said; 'we must keep our great artists. A voice like that——'"

Someone interrupted passionately:

"The French have dropped bombs on Nuremberg."

"Ah, if they do things like that, then we must all go—to the last man."

"The Grand Duke is going to speak to the people from the balcony."

"They don't know what they have conjured up, the treacherous devils; a whole people in arms—united from prince to peasant."

"Germany—Germany——"

The man's voice broke on a sob.

But now a fresh torrent of men and women poured down from the upper galleries and swept the eddying circles before it. The moment of doubt, of half-waking had passed. The dream had become a reality for ever.

And Helmut left his place on the steps and went with them, for a sudden terror possessed him lest they should go on and leave him.

And he dared not be alone.

III

The flood carried him swiftly and surely, and he forgot that he had been afraid. Men pressed against him on every side, shoulder to shoulder, breast to breast. He felt their hot breath on his neck and cheek, their straining muscles, the heave of their panting flanks. Their touch thrilled him. The very odour of their bodies intoxicated him. Suddenly he

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was not Helmut Felde any more, but a monstrous Invincible.

Against the sapphire of the feverish summer night the round full-blown lime trees in the Schlossplatz painted a violet shadow. Between their branches the stars flickered like candles in the wind, coming and going as a faint breeze from the forest stirred the dust-laden, shrivelling leaves to an uneasy rustle. A fugitive scent of flowers hung above the stench and heat and tumult.

Long ago, when he had been a schoolboy, Helmut had come out here from the theatre with music echoing in his heart, and had wandered through this same perfumed dusk, almost happy, building up his broken dreams with youth's unconquerable hope, swearing big oaths to the same stars, feeling the foolish, exquisite tears rise as he stood beside the sleeping flowers.

He had forgotten. All that was gone. He was not the same. He was a drop in a vast ocean—a particle of an immensity. He pressed forward, yielding to its pressure, gasping, sweating, his military cap at the back of his head, his mouth open, mumbling broken, incoherent sentences. He did not know where he was trying to go. But there was no need for him to know. *It* knew. It would carry him whither it would—to his appointed place. He had no meaning if he were not of it—if he were to be at all he must go with it—if need be go down with it.

It swept the half-circle of the Schlossplatz to the central avenue. There, with the muffled boom of an Atlantic wave thundering into some cavern, it broke against a second phalanx coming from the town, and recoiled, baffled, tossing hither and thither in frantic vacillation. It had for that moment a terror of itself.

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It could have danced a saturnalia of sheer panic. But as it wavered, a drum-beat flashed over its black unrest, the distant pipes wailed like the first breath of a coming storm, and instantly the herd fell silent, as though its collective soul had heard the secret rallying cry for which it waited.

Helmut lifted himself on the shoulders of a man in front of him. He saw the darkness fissured by two parallel lines of fire which came on steadily, relentlessly. The flames of the torches streamed back like banners. Their secret glare danced wickedly on the set, blank faces of men, on the fixed bayonets that flowed past in a glittering stream. The crowd gave way before them. It was orderly now, disciplined, horribly controlled. Though it spread from wall to wall of the huge square it did not touch the flowers that slept in their dark beds. Though there were thieves and criminals in its midst it committed no excess. The will that governed it had no use for tumult, and not yet for destruction.

A man had come out on to the Palace balcony. He was a mere dot against the light, and his voice was an empty sound to Helmut and those around him. Yet they stood motionless and hushed like men on the threshold of a cathedral. The High Priest, who officiated at the Altar, was nothing. They did not need to hear his words. They knew that that which he held up for them to worship was a Holy and a Mighty Thing.

The voice faded. They answered it—three times with the thunder-shocks of a mighty hammer. Then they swung round. Like a regiment on parade they formed into columns fifty deep and stormed past under the midget figure—singing. Their faces, lifted to the light, were fixed in a strange smile—in the exalted

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stare of pilgrims who have come at last to the heights of Pisgah; of disciples to whom their god has at last revealed himself. They were not drunken. They were terribly sober. They were not ruthless, not cruel, not pitiful. They were a volcanic force set free, a sea that has burst its dam, a thousand lava streams pouring into one channel—towards one end—a force horrific, unmoral, unaccountable. And that which stood against them must be destroyed. That was a natural law.

Yet once at the far corner of the square the crowd slackened its headlong course. It seemed for a last time to be struggling convulsively, like a thing in agony, to resume its component parts, to break away from its own solidarity. But it was too late. The fusion had been complete. For a moment longer the welded mass writhed—then rushed on again, going it knew not where, frenziedly resigned, singing from dry, red-hot throats its high song of praise and sacrifice.

But in that brief welter and confusion, Helmut had been driven under a street-lamp and had seen the face of the man beside him. They had stared at each other, half recognising, half puzzled. Then Helmut had remembered. The tawny beard had become streaked with grey; the clothes were more than ever fantastic and disorderly, the eyes pouched and red-rimmed as though with much suffering. But their sudden laughter was like a light shining out in the midst of ruin and darkness. The old unquenchable humour was there, the whimsical pity, the wise kindliness.

"Why, Helmut, little Helmut——" He made a gallant effort to hold his ground, clinging to the lamp-post. But the tide caught him and tore him

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from his moorings. He turned, trying to wave a greeting—a warning—Helmut could not tell. But he thought suddenly of a drowning man who flings up his hand for the last time out of a whirlpool.

“Juggernaut—Helmutchen—Juggernaut.”

He must have shouted. It sounded like a whisper.

Then the tide swept them apart, and in a moment Helmut had forgotten him.

He pushed on, singing interminably.

CHAPTER II

I

THEY were all there, all except the Geheimrat and his wife. He had written to say that Kurt was home for the night on farewell leave, and that much as he would have liked to have seen them he felt that, in the circumstances, it would be kinder and wiser to stay away.

Kurt was lieutenant in the Yellow Dragoons.

Everyone knew that Gefreite Helmut Felde was "the circumstances."

But the others were there, all the poor relations—Tante Louise, the post-office official's widow, the cousins and their husbands and their children—two *Backfische* in the uniform of the St. Catherine's School, who bobbed with military precision to their elders and over-ate themselves with stolid dignity.

Frau Felde wore her new tartan silk blouse, and the Herr Amtschreiber his frock-coat with the ribbon of the Order of the Red Eagle, fourth class, in the buttonhole.

Never before had the little dining-room seen such a feast. The white tablecloth was strewn with flowers, not recklessly, for every blossom had its proper space allotted to it and there was much eking out with greenstuff, and in the midst were big plate-loads of *Eier-Brötchen* and even *Kaviar-Brötchen*, and dishes of potato salad and a *Gemischte Platter* of gorgeous creamy cakes. On the side table stood

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a glass bowl full of fresh peaches, neatly sliced, into which the Herr Amtschreiber, with all the solemnity of an officiating High Priest, had poured a whole bottle of Hochheimer and half a bottle of Sekt.

Old Anna had been engaged for the evening. They called her "old Anna" because she seemed to have been with them all their lives, and because they could not remember her as a girl. She had always had that patient look of knowledge—she had never moved quickly and lightly. Now much child-bearing and much sorrow had left her slower and heavier than ever. And even the pathos of her dark eyes had grown dim.

She kept on running in and out of the kitchen where her first-born and idiot son mumbled over his share of the feast.

And when they drank Helmut's health in their half-glasses of *Bowle*, she cried. The tears rolled down her sunken cheeks, and she did not trouble to wipe them away. It was as though they had been too often in her life for her to notice them.

Helmut sat at the head of the table, opposite the Venetian glass. Constantly he caught glimpses of himself in its shining depths—eating, laughing, speaking; and each time he had a sense of pause, of disquiet, almost of anger. It was surely a stranger who sat there mimicking him—that blond young man with the sullen weather-tanned face and the raw red hands sticking lumpishly out of the military cuffs.

He grew to hate the glass. It seemed to him that he had always hated it, that far back in his childhood it had done something horrible to him, something that he had forgotten.

Tante Louise nodded. She was always nodding, mostly at the wrong moment. People who did not

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know that she suffered from the palsy were often disconcerted by the nods and malicious winks that she threw at them. Now her wizened monkey-face was twisted into a most humorous expression.

"Yes," she said, "God has made us His instrument. We are the scourge with which He will chastise these wicked nations. The English arrogance has insulted Him long enough. And the French—well, one has only to read a French novel to know what *they* are—a decadent and frivolous people. It is a thousand pities that we were merciful to them forty years ago——"

"Well, it won't happen again," Herr Breithaupt, the bank cashier, declared jovially. "Helmut will see to that, eh?"

They all looked at him. For the first time he counted in their eyes. He represented the thing they worshipped and trusted, and he longed to say something that would please them, that would make them believe in him still more. He laughed. The glass of weak *Bowle* could not have intoxicated him, and yet he knew that he was drunk. His head whirled and throbbed and his blood pounded through his veins. He seemed to be growing bigger, to be swelling up with heat and a senseless anger.

"They won't get much quarter from *me!*" he said. "I shan't take any prisoners." He lunged with his knife, giving it a professional twist. "I'll finish my man every time—like that!"

Tante Louise winked jovially at him.

"That's right. We mustn't have any pity on them. We mustn't have to punish them a third time."

"And yet, after all, the French are not the worst," Herr Breithaupt remarked broad-mindedly. "They

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are a silly, light-headed people, and the English are using them as their catspaw. It is the English who have done this."

"They have been plotting this for fifty years."

"Well, there's one thing, they have thrown down the mask at last. Everyone will know what they are. They will never be able to look honest men in the face again."

"We go into this war with a clean conscience," the Herr Amtschreiber said gently. "However terrible it may be for us we shall be upheld by that knowledge."

"Our good old German virtues won't fail us," the bank cashier agreed. "Did you see the people on the square last night? Ah, that was something to remember. The English would have been drunk to a man, and the French would have been hysterical, but our people—sober, resolute, God-fearing—who will stand against them?"

"And after all war is a wonderful thing," his brother-in-law, the notary, remarked thoughtfully. "It purges. It reveals our virtues of courage and endurance. Who knows if we too were not getting luxurious? It may be that God has sent this war to save us from the pitfalls into which other nations have fallen?"

They were silent, nodding grave acquiescence. Frau Felde looked up at Helmut. She had scarcely spoken. Now a spot of colour burned in either cheek.

"It gives people a chance," she said feverishly. "It shows what they are really made of. My grandfather served as volunteer in the ranks in 1870. He had never been a soldier because of his health. But all his officers were killed—and he led a charge—and they promoted him on the field"—she gave a nervous

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laugh—"of course, he wasn't really a common soldier."

"Of course not." The notary winked at Helmut. "Well, Napoleon said every soldier carried a field-marshal's bâton in his knapsack. Who knows what you'll do, young man?"

Helmut had sat staring stupidly at his empty glass. Now he looked up, considering them each in turn with a sort of dazed truculency.

"I'll do something big," he shouted, "or I won't come back."

They banged the table with fists.

"Bravo! Well spoken, like a true German."

"I'll get my chance this time," he persisted,

The red, swollen-looking face in the glass scowled at him. If only he could get away from it—smash it! If only he could escape its tormenting unfamiliarity!

His mother leant across to him. She laid her hard, strong hand on his clenched one.

"Dear Helmut!"

He had never heard her speak like that before, with such tenderness, almost with reverence.

Herr Breithaupt gave the signal for departure.

"Well, we must be getting home. We've all got to get up early to-morrow to give our hero a farewell wave—come on, Mariechen."

They stood waiting one behind another to shake hands with him. The little girls bobbed to him, and their round eyes were full of awe. He did not have to shrink from them now. He could even treat them indifferently. He had become the elect, the Chosen One, among them.

The notary patted him on the back.

"*Das Vaterland mag ruhig sein,*" he quoted.

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When they had all gone the Herr Amtschreiber went back to his favourite place by the majolica stove. He put his hands against it absently, though it had not been lit for many months.

"Yes, now one knows why one has lived," he said. "Sometimes when I have been very tired I have asked myself what it was all for, whether it mattered. I had had so many hopes and they'd all gone wrong. It seemed not worth while to try so hard. But now I see that it is because I—and all of us—have done our little piece of work faithfully, that we are strong enough to meet this onslaught. And you, too, Helmut, your turn is coming now. It has been hard for you, but you did your best. It hasn't been in vain, Helmut——"

Helmut did not answer. His mother had been gathering the dirty plates together. Now she looked up at him. There was a brooding smile in her pale eyes, a subdued exultation.

"It is going to be a great and wonderful time," she said quietly.

And suddenly he was sobered. He was afraid of her. He saw that she and her love for him were terrible.

II

He looked in as he passed the kitchen on the way to his bedroom. He wanted Anna. He had never once thought of her all the time he had been away, but now a strange desire to be with her possessed him. It was a hunger, a pain like home-sickness. He had forgotten all she had told him about the fairies, but he did remember that she had understood him and played his games. Perhaps she would un-

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derstand now what the others could not understand—what he hardly understood himself. Perhaps he would be able to tell her.

There was nothing splendid or proud or heroic about old Anna. She would not take his heroism for granted. He wouldn't have to say big things to her to impress her. Whatever he did would be right. Even if he put his head down on her lap and cried his heart out she would not be ashamed of him.

He wanted the reassurance of her praise, the overflowing measure of her admiration.

But on the threshold of the little kitchen he stopped short. She knelt with her back towards him amidst the debris of the feast, her arms encircling the frail, hunched-up body of her son. She clung to him, silently, desperately, and the boy's head hung over her shoulder like the head of a broken flower. She did not move. But Helmut could see the muscles of her strong bare arms stand out in the frantic force of her embrace.

Then suddenly, like an animal surprised, she sprang up, facing him.

"Herr Helmut!"

"I—I came to say good-bye," he stammered.

She seemed not to hear him. She tried to brush the lank, disordered hair out of her face. All the stoic patience was gone. There was something savage, insurgent in her bearing.

"Herr Helmut—they won't—they can't take him—can they?"

For a moment he did not understand. He had been thinking of himself. Then he threw an impatient glance at the poor imbecile face.

"No, of course they won't. He's too young. Besides, he's not—he's not——"

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"Not like the others." She nodded. "I'm glad-- I'm glad."

A dull anger stirred in his blood.

"You oughtn't to be. You ought to be ashamed. You ought to want to give a son to the Fatherland."

"But I don't! I don't! We—we suffer too much." She seemed to be struggling desperately to speak clearly, to make him understand. "Yes, we suffer too much, Herr Helmut. All our fine young people—they take them away from us who have had to bear so much for them. And we don't know why—we don't know anything. And they shout a lot of big words at us, and then it's all blood and killing and maiming—all the fine young people killing each other—for the sake of we don't know what. Ach, Herr Helmut, I saw just now—you stabbed with your knife—and when you were a little boy you cried over the dead flowers."

"Be quiet!" he shouted at her. "War's different. War's splendid. One's got to fight for one's country."

She seemed to brush him on one side.

"But they won't take my poor boy. They won't make him do cruel, horrible things. Because he's weak and foolish he won't have to kill people—other women's sons. And I'm glad—I'm glad God made him as He did."

"You're a silly woman, Anna, you don't understand."

She smiled at him, a strange smile, full of distraught wisdom. And all his love turned to hatred.

Without a word he left her, slamming the door behind him.

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III

He lay in the narrow old bed against the wall, and suddenly the thought came to him that he might never sleep there again. Amidst the glamour and pride of the last days the fact that in all probability he was acclaiming his own death had not once touched his consciousness. All that had not seemed to matter. His personality had been swamped. So long as *It* persisted, Helmut Felde's life or death had no significance.

Now, lying there in the darkness and silence, they became everything. The revolt against annihilation shook him like a storm. In measure as he seemed to be growing smaller and weaker and lonelier his passion for life grew. It became a frenzy, a megalomania which reduced the world and its claims on him to shadows.

"I can't—I can't," he repeated under his breath over and over again. "I can't."

He began to make wild plans. How he would run away; escape to America—Switzerland. It was only two hours to the frontier. Or pretend to go mad—or injure himself so that they would have to give him something safe out of the fighting. A ruthless logic drove out his fanatic enthusiasm.

"After all, what does it matter what happens if I'm killed? I shan't know—I shan't care."

He saw himself lying on the battlefield—alive, smashed out of recognition—like a dog that he had seen run over by a motor. He saw himself just after a high explosive had blown him into atoms. He felt his brain burst up into flames; the gradual extinction—the nothingness.

He had been shivering as if with cold. Now the

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sweat broke out over his rigid body. And it was not a dream, not a horrible freak of the imagination. It was a reality that might seize him to-morrow—no, not to-morrow. It was grotesque how the thought that he would be safe to-mo-row, that he still had his breakfast and dinner to look forward to, soothed him. Already his claims on life were dwindling.

But at the back of his mind was the hope that somehow he might escape.

A light shone under his door. He watched it—fascinated. It did not pass on, nor yet did it hesitate. It was the pause of someone quietly resolute. Then the door opened.

She had taken off her blouse and skirt, and the old, red-flannel dressing-gown enclosed her short, stout figure. But she was not ridiculous, not even commonplace. The candle-light encircled her face in soft halo, and behind the dull plainness of her features there was a force and strength that checked his involuntary exclamation. She came over to him.

"Not asleep, Helmut?"

"No, Mother."

They looked at each other steadily. For a moment he had been on the verge of clinging to her, of choking his terror in her arms, of claiming he knew not what strength and pity from her motherhood. The impulse died under her eyes. They, too, suffered—terribly—but it was not his suffering.

"I have brought you something, Helmut." She took his hand in her hard, cold one. "It's my great-grandmother's iron wedding-ring, from the days when our poor Fatherland bled under the heel of the tyrant. *They* knew how to suffer; we've got to learn from them."

"Yes, Mother."

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"Wear it, Helmut."

"Yes, Mother."

He was like a child. He was not even frightened now. It was as though an inexorable destiny held him.

His mother slipped the iron ring on to his little finger. He saw her mouth work in the effort to speak. He knew that she was trying to say something—something fundamental—from the very root of her life.

In a flash of inspiration he knew.

"Mother, if I don't do anything big for the Fatherland, you'd rather I didn't come back."

Suddenly her face was composed—at peace.

"Yes."

He nodded.

"All right."

For a minute longer she looked at him. Then she bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

"God bless you, Helmut."

She took up her candle, and went quietly as she had come.

IV

And in the first hours of the hot August morning he marched out with his regiment. And the crowd marched with them, and the women strewed flowers before them.

Their helmets were wreathed in flowers.

At the corner of the Karlstrasse, Helmut's people waited. They waved to him. His mother's face was almost beautiful. But he could not see old Anna anywhere.

CHAPTER III

I

HE heard it for the first time from the loft of a frontier village inn. There were twenty of them lying on the bare boards, and to find room they had to arrange themselves in an exact circle with their feet towards the centre.

It was pitch dark save for the occasional spluttering flare of a match, or the glow of a pipe. Then the veil thinned, and a dim, spectral face peered through.

Veit Thomas did all the talking. When the others interrupted he overbore them with his slow, heavy voice.

"They've betrayed us," he said. "They had promised—then they let the French through. They sold themselves. But they'll be sorry for it. Just wait. We're a slow people. I know what I'll do when I get among them."

"And I."

"No quarter, eh?"

"Not for a single man."

"And the women?"

A calm voice broke through the half-smothered sniggering.

"We Germans don't make war on women."

Veit Thomas boomed angrily.

"No. But when they make war on us? And they do. Look here. A patrol of our men went

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ahead to reconnoitre a village, and the women shot at them from the windows—picked them off like game. Then they came out and gouged out the eyes of the wounded."

"Who told you that?"

"The Feldwebel told me. It's official. They want us to know so that we can look after ourselves."

A low growl, like that of a partially roused beast, answered him.

"We'll do that all right. If they do things of that sort, we all know how to manage."

Helmut had taken no part in the talk. He lay with his head on his haversack, half dreaming, half waking. His thoughts wandered off into dreams, and then suddenly his dreams would break off and tumble him back into reality. He was bitterly weary. Forty-eight hours in a cattle-truck and a slogging ten hours' march had tried even his hardened young muscles. But he was not unhappy. Every time the cattle-truck had come to a station women had poured on to the platform with flowers and good things to eat. When they had marched through a village the people had greeted them, with tears and smiles of gratitude and pride. It had been music and glory and triumph all the way.

When he closed his eyes he saw his mother's face. Through the murmur of his companions' voices he heard the perpetual singing:

"Germany—Germany before all."

No, war wasn't evil—not even terrible. It was splendid.

Abruptly he sat up. He did not quite know what had startled him. It had been nothing immediate, but it had struck at the very vitals of his conscious-

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ness. It was not so much a sound as a vibration shaking the very foundations of his soul.

Even Veit Thomas was silent.

"Did you hear that?"

"Somebody must have fallen down upstairs."

"But there isn't an upstairs."

"Hark! There it is again."

"A long way off."

Bump—bump—bump—bump!

Somebody spoke in a queer, choking whisper.

"The guns!"

Thereafter they sat silent, listening, staring into the darkness.

II

They came nearer to it. And gradually its character changed. It grew venomous—shrill. They began to associate it with innocent white puffs of cloud—with earth flying up as if by the spade of a giant—not yet with death.

"They're not aiming at us," Veit Thomas would say.

So their first fear died down. Because their own death was not immediate it ceased to be realisable. They grew accustomed and indifferent. They made jokes and gave the various forms of destruction nicknames. That the next day might find them out did not matter. To-day had passed them by.

A week after that first initiation they knew that their time had come. No one had told them. They felt it in their nerves, they read it in the faces of their officers.

The very guns chanted it to them. At each outbreak of their infernal chorus the men stole quick,

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uneasy glances skywards. Their jokes failed. Only Veit Thomas shook his head obstinately.

"Well, they haven't got our range, anyhow," he muttered.

At nightfall they made way for other troops, halting along the side of a sunken road whilst company after company of infantry with fixed bayonets poured past them through the twilight. Except for the dust-muffled thud of their feet they made no sound. There was no singing, no talking. The officers urged them forward with gestures. They were shadows hurrying into the unknown.

"They are going to the assault," Veit Thomas whispered. "We're the reserve—the tenth wave. But it isn't likely they'll want us. The Belgians run like hares when they see our bayonets. Lüttich falls to-morrow—they say so."

"And the attack?" Helmut whispered back.

"Just before daybreak."

So it had come at last.

The light faded. Calmly and beautifully the night gathered over the earth. The men in the sunken road huddled closer to one another. For the beauty and quiet troubled them. They would have welcomed an outbreak of a tempest. They suffered dumbly because they could not drag the firmament down into their wretchedness. There had been at least splendour in their daylight hell. Now the minute and distant stars had a majesty that made the bursting shrapnel overhead no more than the destructiveness of an angry child.

At first they talked—spasmodically, in undertones—but as the hours wore on their voices faltered and died away. A man would begin a sentence and break off, as a shell ripped the sky overhead, to listen.

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In the end they only listened. It was as though by listening they could escape—as though, if for a moment they relaxed their vigilance, the infernal thing would fall upon them and destroy them. Only in a lull their tense muscles relaxed and they stirred, mutteringly.

A hand laid itself on Helmut's arm.

"We've made it all," a voice whispered in his ear, "and it's got loose, and we can't control it any more, and it'll destroy us—all of us."

Helmut nodded at the darkness. He did not know the voice, but it was young and eager, and he would have been glad to answer. But he could not think. His whole being seemed to be concentrated on a stream of shells that went screeching past overhead like a flight of evil birds. When they had gone he drew his breath. He calculated it would be a minute before others came—a minute precious as life, sweet as relief from pain.

"It's queer, sitting here and waiting," the voice went on, "just waiting to kill or be killed. I'm glad our people don't know, aren't you? I've got a sister, and she worries. If she saw me now——"

"That one was nearer—one felt the earth shake," Helmut muttered between his teeth.

"To-morrow—at daybreak," the voice whispered. "Isn't that what they said?"

"Yes—unless they break through at the first assault. And they're sure to; they can't fail." Hitherto he had been hardly conscious of his companion's personality. It had been like the voice of an inner self. Now something touched him to self-forgetfulness.

"Are you frightened too?" he asked.

"I—I don't know. Yes, I am, but I don't know

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what of. It's not of dying. I keep on thinking—out there somewhere there's someone whom I'm going to kill, or who has got to kill me. And we've never seen each other. We don't know—and all the time we're getting nearer and nearer. And then suddenly it will be done. We can't help it, and that's what frightens me. We can't help it—we're driven." He paused, and Helmut felt that the unknown face quivered. "I've never killed anything—not even a kitten. I couldn't. My sister says that once I've killed someone I shall never be the same again—that one can't do cruel things and go on minding. Do you think that's so, comrade?"

"One doesn't do cruel things," Helmut answered impatiently. "One fights for one's home, one's country. That's duty. Killing someone in fair fight isn't cruel; it's splendid; just as being killed oneself is the most splendid thing of all. My mother was proud when I went."

A sigh fluttered up through the darkness.

"Yes. My sister is good and beautiful. But she is a strange girl. She has thoughts of her own. She does not think like other people. They are angry with her in our village because of the things she says."

"Some women are like that," Helmut muttered. "They don't understand. They don't care about honour and glory. They don't see how splendid it is to be able to do fine, manly things, to be able to kill your enemy. I had an old nurse like that. She didn't care a bit about our country. She only thought of her idiot son." He broke off abruptly. "It's getting light," he whispered. "Surely it can't be——"

Dread overwhelmed him. Only a few minutes

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ago they had had the whole night before them. Now the night was gone. He tried not to believe it. But where there had been formless darkness there were now shapes—blurred—dimly moving. He could discern the outline of the figure huddled beside him.

"Comrade, my name is Hans—Hans Hildebrandt. My sister lives up there in Embach; if anything happened—if you write——"

"Yes, yes."

"Thank you." He gave a little shaky laugh. "Perhaps after all I shan't kill anyone. I think if I didn't she would be glad to know."

He stopped, with a painful catch of the breath. For suddenly the bombardment had ceased. The silence stunned them. It was ominous—more threatening than all the tumult. Their hearts turned to water. It was as though they had been cast headlong into a frightful emptiness.

The hush lasted a full minute. Then came the mean, malicious rat-a-tat-tat of machine-guns.

"Now," Veit Thomas whispered chokingly. "Now——"

They waited—stiff, motionless, with wide-open, sightless eyes. Hours seemed to pass in that waiting. Then through the twilight men began to appear. They came singly—in couples—anyhow. Four of them carried something shapeless and inert between them. The procession went on and on—silent, ghostly, endless.

And those crouching against the embankment watched them with a dumb questioning.

"Where have you come from? What do you know now?"

They received no answer. The blank-faced shadows did not even look at them. They had a

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strange air of aloofness and indifference as though that which they had seen separated them from the rest of mankind, as though nothing could ever really matter to them again.

The boy at Helmut's side spoke to him, but now he could not even listen. He tried vainly to steady himself, even to pray, but the very words jumbled themselves to grotesque meaninglessness. He tried to think of his people, of Germany, of all the glory which had seemed so much, and which was now nothing. His soul dwindled in him. He was nothing but an animal—a body cowering in mortal terror.

Yet when a whistle sounded he got up. He did the impossible—and strangely enough he knew that he could not help doing it. He turned his face to the Unknown as those others had done before him. He drove his quivering, revolting body along the road at the double. He sent it scrambling up the embankment out into the open.

Von Steuban and his under-officer ran at their heels.

"Get on—get on with you!"

It looked so innocent. The soft rose of sunrise hid the scarred earth in a celestial radiance. The little mounds scattered close together over the fields boded no evil. They were quiet and peaceful as long-forgotten graves. Not till Helmut had stumbled, cursing frantically, over one of them did he understand.

It was soft—boneless. It moved—it clung to him. He kicked himself free—and it gasped and dropped back inertly. He had then a lightning vision of that first procession that had passed them in the dusk—of those strong, straight young bodies—of these stern faces turned towards their destiny—and this.

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But he felt neither pity nor horror nor even fear. Suddenly he had become excited, glorified. He was happier than he had ever been. He had broken through a fog into the full splendour of life. This was the splendour of life—to meet death—to go out and meet death willingly, of one's own choice—in the prime of one's strength and manhood.

But underneath the exaltation something was stirring, uncoiling itself, lifting a sinister, listening head.

Men fell on either hand. They fell very quietly—with an awful simplicity. No one heeded them. The line closed up. Singing frenziedly, they staggered on towards the wavering line of smoke fifty yards ahead. The air whistled with death and it was like the music of a tarantella.

Helmut began to run. He trod on those who had gone before him. He was indifferent to them except that they made him angry. A rage was mounting in his blood—a wolfish hunger to come at last face to face with this invisible enemy—to hold him and stab him and crush him underfoot.

They rushed their first objective—an open trench evacuated by the defenders in the first assault. The ten waves had come thus far and here they had broken. But they served faithfully, even now. Their twisted, mangled bodies lay heaped one upon another, they filled the trench almost to the brink.

The eleventh wave had only to run across.

Helmut's boot crashed into an upturned, staring face.

"Germany—Germany—Germany—before all——"

He did not know whether he screamed or whispered it or whether it was only an echo in his own

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brain. At least he heard nothing else. It filled his senses. It was a sacred Mantra—hypnotic, numbing every passion but the one.

The last few yards passed in a whirl of darkness. He stumbled over some wire entanglement and fell. By the time he caught up with his companions the end was almost in sight. Only here and there a machine-gun sputtered up, like the last snarl of a mortally wounded animal. From somewhere out of sight came the click of steel—a stifled grunting and groaning.

A handful of unarmed men came towards Helmut. They seemed to have sprung out of the bowels of the earth. They came running and stumbling, their hands above their heads, their grey faces full of a piteous eagerness. But the red rage had mounted to Helmut's brain.

"No prisoners! No prisoners!"

And again he did not know—was it another's voice, or his own, or the thought in his brain?

It was then the boy next him lurched, coughed, and rolled over.

Helmut screamed. He jumped the fallen body and ran straight for the man nearest him. He saw his look of almost comic horror.

It was amazing how easy it was, how sweet, like wine to a parched throat. The savage force of the lunge drove right through so that for an instant the man remained standing—gaping stupidly. Then he went down, suddenly—dragging the rifle out of Helmut's hold. He lay there, spread-eagled, pinned to the earth like some horribly tortured insect—wriggling feebly. The eyes that met Helmut's were fixed for ever in a puzzled, angerless surprise.

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Helmut saw that there were no prisoners.

Veit Thomas stumbled up to him.

"Well done, Felde, that was a fine stroke. Good thing you didn't want your bayonet for another, though. I've got my man too—my first."

He mopped himself with a red hand, reeling and swaggering like a drunken butcher.

CHAPTER IV

I

HE stood silent for a minute looking down on the prostrate soldier with a rather wry expression about the mouth. The young man was asleep. Like the rest of his companions, he had not even bothered to remove his haversack, but had dropped where he stood on the dusty roadside, and lay there motionless as a dead man. One hand clutching a rifle was flung out in a gesture of abandonment. His helmet had fallen back and showed the close-cropped flaxen hair, the young white forehead above the line of sunburn. The straight eyebrows and fair down on the gaunt cheeks shone golden in the sunlight. But even in sleep the mouth was too tight-pressed, unyouthful, hard. There was something marred and cruel in a face otherwise poignantly young and fine which caused the observer to mutter uncomfortably to himself, and finally, as though he could bear the unconscious self-betrayal no more, to stir the sleeper with his foot.

"Na—Helmutchen!"

The soldier grumbled, and lifting himself on his elbow, blinked up sullenly.

"What's the matter—can't you leave me alone? Why, it's Herr Heilig; I'm sorry. I didn't see; one looks so different."

"That's true, my son. And no doubt one is

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different. For there's a lot more in a uniform than meets the eye."

He laughed, not very joyously, and squatted down at his companion's side, moving his arms gymnastically in an effort to restore the circulation. "By the way, it's Gefreite Heilig now, if you don't want to get into trouble. You didn't know I was a soldier, eh?"

"No."

"Well, nor did I. But now it looks as though I were. I'm one of the new draft. You must have been badly cut up there before Lüttich."

"Fifty per cent."

"H'm, they put up a big fight."

"They had to. They knew they'd get no quarter."

Heilig nodded. The pouchy, unhealthy eyes twinkled pleasantly.

"And quite right too. The cheek of them—standing up to us. Positively blasphemous. One can't be too severe on that kind of thing, my son. How do you like killing people, Helmut?"

The boy smiled superiorly.

"Oh, I don't know. The first one made me feel a bit queer. But I've got over that sort of silliness. One's only got to think of the things they've done. It's like killing vermin."

"Quite. You always were a bit of a fire-eater. Do you remember that day in the Gymnasium Hof, when you went for Kurt Köhler—head down? Looking back on the episode I can't help feeling you were a bit blasphemous yourself, defying authority and might like that. Well, you and Köhler are on the same side now. One grows wiser with the years, eh, Helmut?"

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His companion shot him a dull look of suspicion.

"I don't know what you mean. Of course we're all on the same side. We're Germans. Those who aren't on our side are traitors."

Heilig nodded gravely.

"That's so. The moralists, my son, make a mistake by supposing that choice must necessarily lie between right and wrong. It is not always quite so easy as that, not for ordinary mortals like myself. There are such things as conflicting moralities, Helmut, conflicting duties, though perhaps you have never met them."

"I know my duty."

"Fortunate young man! Well, I've spent many a bad quarter of an hour trying to discover mine. And even now I'm not sure."

Helmut fidgeted irritably.

"I tell you, I don't understand all that talk. I don't want to. I want to rest. I don't suppose we've got another five minutes."

"And it's been a gruelling march. Well, you're young, and you haven't got a certain little something the matter with your inside to add to the natural joys of a ten-hours' promenade. You see, it's not entirely for my soldierly qualities that I have been re-made a soldier. There are political Uriahs, my son, among this Chosen People, and they all go to the firing-line."

Helmut appeared not to have heard. Throughout he had been morosely inattentive. Now he broke out with his concealed obsession.

"It's the water," he stammered thickly. "We emptied our water-bottles early, and since then we haven't been allowed to re-fill them. And we've passed rivers. They say we shan't get anything to

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drink till we get to the next village—that's ten miles away—and the dust—it makes one mad. They say they have poisoned everything." His blue, red-rimmed eyes were turned on Heilig with a deadly smiling ferocity. "When we get there we'll make them drink first, and if there's anything wrong, by God, we'll wipe them off the earth—all of them!"

Heilig did not answer immediately. When he spoke at last his tone was detached and careless.

"Yes, thirst is damnable. It reduces one to an animal. And I'm no hero, God knows. A little while back it got too much for me. I felt if I didn't get something to drink I'd run amuck. So when we got to a stream I pretended I'd hurt my foot and fell out. Whilst I was bathing it and no one was looking I had a drink. It was a good, long drink, Helmut. Well, perhaps the devil doesn't want me yet—or the poison is a slow one."

He was silent, staring calmly in front of him. But the young man's hand had tightened on the stock of his rifle. Suddenly his face had grown red and swollen-looking.

"I tell you, I don't know what you're trying to get at, Herr Heilig. I don't want to. I want to be left alone. Just because you were decent to me when I was a silly kid, you don't need to make claims now. I remember you weren't like the rest, they said you made fun of things—serious things. Now you disobey orders and try to make out that our leaders tell lies. You're the sort we've been warned against, the sort that'll believe anyone rather than their own people. And I won't listen. I want to be left alone."

Heilig rose heavily to his feet.

"You're well within your rights, Helmut. I ought not to have disturbed you. But you were so

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absurdly like and unlike the little spitfire who butted my pet abomination in the tummy that I could not resist. It's always a mistake to revive the past. Some people have a disconcerting way of growing up. You have grown up—quite a lot. But perhaps one day you will grow young again." He clicked his heels together and bowed very solemnly, though with twinkling eyes. In his ill-fitting uniform he made a comic figure—more than ever scarecrow-ish. "In that event we may have another talk." He added gaily, "Providing always that I am not dying invisibly of prussic acid."

Helmut made a sullen, threatening movement, but at that moment a whistle sounded. The inert bodies strewn along the wayside staggered to their feet, and with a mocking affectation of terror Getreite Heilig shambled back to his company.

II

The days when men and women ran out to welcome them were gone. They were not defenders and heroes any more. They were the detested enemy. And it was strange how bitter the change tasted. It was a constant irritant, a poison, fevering the blood, disorienting the fancy. In the distance they would see figures toiling in the fields—when they came nearer, the fields were empty.

Life fled before them as before the plague.

And they were childishly anxious to be cheered and welcomed—loved, even. They took refuge from this incredible hatred in a jocose ferocity.

"Aha, they're frightened of us. Good! We will give them something to be frightened about."

Towards dusk at the end of that long, maddening

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day Helmut saw a child's face peering at them through the trees. It was a white mask of terror and contempt and curiosity. And suddenly Helmut lifted his rifle and took aim. He meant the threat in angry fun—he wanted to obliterate that absurd contempt in awe and terror. But the child did not move, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

A hand struck up the barrel of his rifle.

"Steady, comrade."

He laughed stupidly, like a man waking from a dream, and went on.

III

The Feldwebel, with five armed men at his heels, battered at the door, and finally, between them, they kicked it into splinters. In the whole town not a light showed, not a soul moved. It might have been a place of the dead. But they knew that behind every door and shutter there were watching eyes and listening ears. That lurking, invisible hatred played evilly on their nerves. They were good Germans, honest and sober, adorned with all the galaxy of German virtues, defending their sacred soil victoriously from an outrageous wrong, and this treacherous people hid from them—shrank from them.

The Feldwebel muttered between his teeth :

"They've good reason to hide, I'll swear. They're up to some devilment. Wait! We'll hunt the rats out."

They ran into the dark passage, Helmut at the under-officer's side. At the far end was another door, and that, too, they burst open with their shoulders. It had not been locked, but their nerves de-

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manded action—violence. Somehow they had to assert themselves against that passive hostility.

The low, narrow kitchen was lit by a single candle. The flame threw a flickering brightness on the figure of a woman seated at the table. She was very old, so old that she seemed hardly human. Her body was bent double. Her hands, lying inert and indifferent on the bare table, were like the claws of a dead bird. But her eyes lived. They shone fiercely from out of their sunken depths. They gave a fierce strength and meaning to the countless lines that fretted the shrunken face.

A girl stood close behind her—youth and age, decay and beauty in almost brutal juxtaposition. And there was a young man somewhere in the shadow. Neither of the three moved or spoke. They looked at the intruders with the same expression. It was a sort of blankness, a veil drawn over an inexpressible loathing.

The Feldwebel blustered.

"What do you mean by not opening the door? What do you mean by all this tomfoolery? Do you think we Germans are going to be kept waiting on the doorsteps like little dogs, by a dirty crew like you? You want teaching, my friends, and by God you'll have learnt something by the time I've finished with you."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. Not a muscle of her face had moved.

"We don't understand your language, monsieur."

Nor did they understand hers. Even Helmut with his remnants from Gymnasium days could make nothing of the patois. But her tone needed no translation. It was an insult, the cut of a whip across their faces.

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The Feldwebel moderated his tone. It was like the self-restraint of a bull, who holds his ground for a minute before charging.

"Look here, I don't want any of that infernal chattering. You know what I mean well enough. You haven't been trained and paid as spies for nothing. We have been ten hours without food or rest or drink, and I warn you we're in no temper to be played with. If you treat us fairly you've nothing to be afraid of; but if you play us any tricks we'll have no mercy on man, woman, or child. I'm here to quarter my men on you, and see that they get food and rest without being poisoned, or having their throats cut in their sleep, as has happened to some of our brave fellows." He strode across the room, and filled a cup with water from the tap. "Now, to begin with, you drink that up, Mütterchen, and then we'll know where we are."

The man was not wholly ill-natured. Some of his rage had begun to evaporate. He held the cup out to the old woman with a bluff laugh.

"Come on, it's all right to drink our healths in cold water; it brings bad luck, they say."

The old woman stared at him. Behind her mask a genuine puzzlement and uncertainty began to show itself. It was as though she felt herself to be dealing with an incomprehensible and incalculable lunatic. She shrank away from the proffered cup.

"No, no; I do not understand. What do you want?"

The Feldwebel's face darkened.

"Come, drink, if you want to prove your good faith!"

"No, I tell you I do not understand."

"Ah, you don't like your own medicine, eh?"

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But you shall drink it; we're running no risks here. If you've monkeyed with the wells——"

The five men came up close behind him. The sight of water, the thought that it might be snatched from them even now, incensed them to the point of frenzy. Hardly knowing what he did or what he wanted, Helmut caught the young girl by the arm. She tore herself free, and at the same moment the young man came out of the shadow. The movement was enough. Helmut laughed. He seized the girl in his arms and kissed her.

"Leave my sister alone."

"Drink—drink, I tell you!"

There was no sound for an instant but that of their quick, hot breath. The girl and Helmut stared at each other. He had laughed. It had been an answer to a challenge—a good joke. But now he did not laugh any more. The girl wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. Her eyes narrowed. Then in an uncontrollable gust of loathing she spat at him.

"Ah, you vixen—you——"

He sprang at her. The young man slipped between and they collided violently.

"Drink—drink!"

The old woman, chattering in panic-stricken terror of what was coming, dashed the cup aside.

In the same instant Helmut and the brother closed. They fell back against the table. It overturned, flinging them into a darkness which was lit by a vivid flash. The hands at Helmut's throat let go their hold. A body lurched against him, sighed, and went down limply.

Someone shouted.

"They've murdered me; it's a trap—a trap!"

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The room seemed suddenly to fill with men. The pitchy darkness writhed with them. They could not escape from each other. They fought one another, gasping and groaning in an anguish of terror.

"Treachery—treachery!"

Helmut had made a rush for the door. But he could not find it. His frantic hands slid over an interminable surface.

"They've shut us in, they'll murder us like rats."

Another shot fell. Suddenly they found the door. It was wide open. They burst out into the passage, banging against the walls, falling over each other, shouting insanely.

"Treachery—treachery!"

The light had been set to the powder cask. The whole night was lit by the explosion. In answer men came pouring out of the houses, out of the side streets. They seemed to spring out of the very earth, rushing hither and thither like a swarm of ants whose hill has been suddenly crushed in. In the market-place two streams coming from different directions collided and fell upon one another with a howl of panic.

The first few isolated shots had become a steady fusillade.

How long the pandemonium lasted no one knew. But suddenly a new power, a deliberate purpose, took control. There was order then—order of a kind.

Helmut did not know whom he followed, whom he obeyed. But there was no choice. He ran in and out of the houses. He had a blurred vision of himself chasing flying shadows along corridors, up steep, narrow stairs into black garrets—of stabbing—stabbing sometimes into air, sometimes into soft, spongy things that squealed and whimpered.

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Like a terrier hunting rats in a big barn.

His arms ached. He laughed and shouted in an hysterical lust of slaughter.

There was light enough now. One could see what one was doing. The town blazed from end to end. The red flames leapt up into the night sky with the joy of spirits released from hell. The streets were a flood of fire on which floated little black specks of men.

And still Helmut ran on and on, staggering, reeling, his foam-flecked mouth open in a shout that was nothing but a strangled grunting.

IV

The fire had almost burnt itself out. Mournful and grey and still the morning broke over the smouldering ruins. The gay lilt of a bugle sounded strangely—like a bird's song in some age-old place of death.

A squadron of dragoons rode first. They clattered and jingled down the cobbled street. The men glanced at the broken walls and gaping doors, curious but unmoved. A child's body tossed out into the middle of the road troubled the horses, and one of the men dismounted and carried it not untenderly back into its home.

Then they rode on.

A company of infantry followed. Hauptmann von Prütwitz marched at their head. He carried himself well, and on his face there was a happy serenity—the look of a man who is set out on a high purpose.

He did not see the child huddled in the doorway. He did not see, nor in any case would he have recog-

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nised the soldier lying not far off. His eyes were fixed straight ahead on his own vision.

The soldier did not hear them pass. He slept the deep, sweet sleep of exhaustion in a little niche amidst the ruins of a fallen house. His body was curled up easily and naturally. The rifle had slipped from his hand.

But there were stains on the field-grey uniform—grotesque stains on the peaceful face half-hidden in the curve of his arm.

It was as though whilst he slept an enemy had wilfully besmeared him.

CHAPTER V

I

IN ten hours order and even a semblance of prosperity and gaiety had been conjured up. Beer shops and canteens were established with amazing promptitude in any ruin that offered the smallest protection from the threatening storm that already moaned and muttered overhead. Gay-coloured lanterns illuminated their inviting signs. On one of them a facetious host informed his guests that he intended to open shortly on the Rue de Rivoli in more commodious and less draughty quarters. The officers of such regiments as were resting before a further advance had billeted themselves in the few intact buildings to the west of the town, and messed luxuriously in the chief hotel which miraculously had escaped destruction.

In the streets, even after nightfall, there was a constant movement. Troops poured through on their way westwards. The sound of their passing varied but never wholly ceased. The clatter of horse, the crash and rumble of guns, the rhythmic beat of infantry were three phrases in a monotonous tune to which the ear became accustomed and finally indifferent.

The pavement swarmed with activity. Officers of all ranks hurried backwards and forwards between their Casino and the commanding general's headquarters. The common soldiers who were off duty avoided that particular route where their contented

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loitering was incessantly broken. They came together in the dim hovels where the acrid smell of destruction still lingered. Their sober, hearty singing lent a warm sonority to the shallow bustle and clatter of the street.

They sang of their homes, of the women they had left behind, of the day when they should come back to them.

The rare street lamps and red-eyed lanterns blinked in the gusts of angry wind. An endless procession of fantastic shadows fled light-footed along the walls. It was as though Carnival were being held amidst the ruins of a lost civilisation.

An undercurrent of life there was that had no part in the feast. They were the bats and mice and scurrying things that had had their homes here generation after generation and had believed the firm brick and mortar to be their very own. Now they skulked tremblingly in their dark holes and burrows, peering out with tragic resignation at the unknown Power which had ordained their end.

II

Lieutenant Köhler came out of the Casino and down the stone steps clattering his sword noisily after him. In the street he lingered a minute or two, scowling and fingering his reddish little moustache with an impatient tenderness. He was bored and out of temper. For one thing he considered he had been unfairly treated in the matter of quarters; for another there was a rumour that the Yellow Dragoons were to be dismounted and sent into the front trenches. On hearing which he had started up in fury, banging the table.

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"What the devil are they up to? Do they think they can mix us cavalry with a lot of line rag and bob-tail?"

An infantry officer who had been present had taken umbrage, and there had very nearly been a nasty scene; even now, in spite of his suave and tactful withdrawal, Lieutenant Köhler could not be sure that there would not be consequences, and the possibility, added to the intensifying vibration of gun-fire, filled his cup of discontent to the brim.

He proceeded on his way slowly, keeping to the middle of the pavement, returning salutes with that air of combined accuracy and insolence which he had made his own, ignoring such soldiery as sprang stiffly out of his path, bowing deferentially to his superiors. His small, alert eyes shot penetrating glances into the darkness. Though he had no clear idea as yet what he was looking for, nothing escaped him.

A soldier lurched out of a doorway. Lieutenant Köhler had almost passed, but not quite enough either for the regulations or his own exasperated temper. He swung round, overtook the man at a stride, and struck him across the legs with his scabbard.

"What the hell do you mean by not saluting? Don't you see who I am, you drunken hog?"

The soldier had jerked up rigidly.

"Verzeihung, Herr Leutnant, I didn't see."

"Ah, you didn't see—you didn't see." He stopped, overtaken by a sudden thought. "Here, under the lamp with you!"

He was obeyed. They stood close to one another with the yellow, wavering light on their faces. Though they gave no sign, picture after picture

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flashing up out of the past held them silent, staring at each other. And each knew what the other remembered.

Köhler's hand went back to his moustache. He was in no hurry now. The joke was too good to be spoilt by impatience. This was something to write home about. He even began a mental description of the shambling figure in the ill-fitting uniform, and he had a vision of himself as he must appear to this degenerate clod. Even in these days of field-grey a cavalry officer knew how to make the most of himself.

A poison that had rankled in his blood for years was to be cured by an antidote—a very subtle, sweet-tasting antidote.

He let the soldier stand there in front of him, still rigidly at attention, whilst he examined him leisurely from head to foot. Then his eyes passed on, till, coming to rest on the house opposite, they narrowed with a new recollection. For a minute he genuinely forgot his victim. He smiled to himself, a greedy animal little smile. There was a pleasant tingling in his nerves, a rush of hot blood to his face.

He knew now what he had been looking for.

The house had been fired, but not wholly destroyed. An attempt had been made to close and barricade the splintered door. The empty windows were dark, and yet somehow they suggested life, cowering, watching.

Lieutenant Köhler moistened his lips.

"Your name, number and regiment," he demanded.

"Helmut Felde, 3078, D Company, Regiment Köningin Louise, No. 45."

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"Good! I shall know whom to report. In the meantime, there's a girl living in that house. You will go in and fetch her and bring her to my quarters—over there on the third floor. Immediately. Do you understand?"

It was very subtle. He complimented himself. His coarse hearing sharpened to catch the full flavour of the answer. It came at last—parrot-like, toneless:

"Jawohl, Herr Leutnant."

"Good! And hurry up."

He sauntered on, spur jingling, sword clattering. He smiled to himself. The hand that still played mechanically with the reddish moustache had begun to tremble.

III

He knew his way this time, but now he went slowly, with leaden feet. He did not think of the thing he had come to do, his brain was empty. But an unutterable misery weighed upon him. He could have killed himself. It did not occur to him once to disobey.

The lock on the door at the end of the passage had been broken the night before. He remembered how he had broken it with a kick. The door swung open slackly at his touch. It was quite dark, and in the room itself very still. But all around him the house murmured like a thing in pain. He could hear the wind sighing through its broken walls. And when a gun, nearer than the rest, boomed, it shuddered.

"Who is there?"

His own voice startled him, jerked him to a standstill. It seemed to come from someone else. It sounded strained and breathless and frightened. He stood aghast for a moment. Then he remembered an

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electric torch which he had taken from a dead Belgian. He sent its white eye peering through the obscurity. It lit up piece by piece the gashed, disfigured room, the little bits of furniture, smashed to matchwood, the heap of broken crockery—a discoloured crust—all covered with a thin, yellow powder—as though everything had happened years ago.

And it had been last night.

The light came to rest on the two figures on either side of the fireplace. Helmut felt that they also had been there for a long time. They were like figures in an old forgotten wax-work show, grey and colourless and dusty, living with a strange, sinister life of their own.

The one was indeed almost unrecognisable. It might have been a bundle of ragged clothes, heaped up into a grotesque resemblance to a human body, to which someone, in a freakish mood, had attached a mask. But the other stood straight and tall, her hand on the mantelshelf, her eyes fixed on the black and empty grate.

On the floor by the window was a long, inert thing, covered by an old tablecloth, with a cross and rosary upon its breast.

Helmut came further into the room. He tried to move quietly, but the boards creaked under his tread.

"Fräulein—Mademoiselle," he muttered, "il faut venir avec moi——"

She turned towards him. Even with that full white light upon her, her eyes were dead and lustreless. She did not answer, and they stood for a long minute looking at each other. Last night there had been hatred and challenge between them. Now there was nothing but this bottomless misery. He tried to

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repeat his little French sentence, like a child repeating a lesson that it does not understand, but an invisible hand was at his throat, choking him. "Faut venir—avec——" But still she did not answer, and his wretchedness was lit by an imperative need to get on with this—to have done with it—at all costs to get away from this place of horror. "Il faut—il faut," he repeated desperately.

That was the keynote of it all—"Il faut—il faut."

He blundered towards her. He was almost crying. As he caught her by the arm the bundle huddled in the chair was galvanised with a sudden horrible life. For a second it stood upright, straight as in youth, its mask flaming with hate, its fleshless arms lifted in malediction, then broke, crumbling to nothing.

The girl shook off his hold. She did it easily, impatiently, as though he had been an importunate child. Whatever power he had had was gone. She could have escaped him. But instead she stood looking at the dead woman and at the thing beneath the window. And to Helmut it seemed that she held communion with them.

"Eh bien, monsieur, je viens!"

Her voice was calm and natural. She might have been consenting to some commonplace request. They went out together. On the steps, from force of habit, she turned to close the door, and then seeing the splintered panels and hanging lock, sighed under her breath. Whilst they crossed the road she kept close to him, sheltering from the rain-sodden wind.

Her warm touch on his arm burnt him. He pushed her roughly in front up the narrow stairs. If

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only she had struggled—if only she would spit at him so that he could hate her. But she was so docile, so gentle. On the third floor she stood aside for him to pass.

"Come in!"

He pushed the door open. He saw Köhler lounging by the fireplace. The lieutenant had taken off his military coat, and wore a light-grey Letewka, carelessly unbuttoned. He turned for an instant to throw his cigar into the grate, and the firelight flooded his full face with a brutal virility.

"Ah, mademoiselle, comme vous êtes amiable." He clicked his heels together, his hand upon his heart, his little eyes gloating over her. "Et belle," he added. Then he remembered Helmut, and the false good-humour died out of his face, leaving a cruel, childish triumph. "Get out—you!" he snapped. "Get out, and thank God on your knees if I don't punish you!"

An impulse leapt up in Helmut, an insane impulse. But then Kurt had always been able to do that. There was something about him which could unseat the reason.

If only he, Helmut, had passed that exam—if only Kurt had not worn that uniform—if only the girl protested—if Kurt had even touched her at that moment.

But she stood there quiet and indifferent, her hand holding her shawl crossed upon her bosom. It was as though nothing of all this concerned her. And yet she must have known of that sudden stir, for she looked at Helmut for a moment, and her eyes were full of an aloof, contemptuous pity.

And perhaps Köhler knew too. Perhaps he, too, had had a glimpse of what was passing behind that

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mask of disciplined stolidity, Perhaps the one fine instinct in him of self-preservation warned him.

He advanced threateningly. But there was fear in his face and in his voice.

"Do you hear—get out!"

The old law reasserted itself. The flame flickered and went out.

"Zu Befehl, Herr Leutnant!"

The door closed. He stood alone on the dark landing. The howl of the wind, the mysterious murmur and rustle of unseen things, the dull persistent boom of the guns did not reach his hearing. He only heard the silence in that room behind him, that obscene, hideous silence.

He could see them standing there, confronting one another, the man and the woman, and the man's face.

Like a tiger crouching.

And then panic overwhelmed him. He rushed recklessly, blindly down the stairs, out into the storm—on and on—the Horror hot at his heels.

IV

An hour later, Heilig met him zig-zagging through the torrential darkness, and drunk beyond reasoning.

Fortunately, it was already late and the tempest had swept the streets clear, so that he had encountered no one of any dignity on his progress. The wind and the swirl of rain muffled his shouts to an unintelligible murmur. He seemed to have forgotten his distrust of the older man. He clung to Heilig desperately, though he persisted on his own course.

"Must find it," he explained. "Must—that's

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German for '*il faut*'—looked it up in a dictionary—fine word—very useful—must find it—my bayonet—lost my bayonet—old man—what do they do to you for that, eh? Shoot you—penal servitude? Besides, I want it, want to take it home; I've killed a deuced few with it—dozens—lost count after twenty—all sorts, my dear boy—men, women and kids. When I woke up in the morning, I was up to my eyes in it—swimming in it." He lurched and hiccupped helplessly—"And now I've lost the damned thing—and I tell you I want to take it home. I want to show it to my mother. She'll be so proud. She'll hang it on the wall. I promised I'd do something big for the Fatherland—and I have—haven't I? She'll tie a ticket to it—'With this bayonet my son Helmut killed dozens of his country's enemies.' What a damned nuisance losing count like that."

Heilig held him upright with difficulty.

"Well, never mind about your bayonet, anyhow; you'll not find it again on a night like this. Better let me get you back to your quarters before there's a row."

"I tell you, I know where I lost it," Helmut persisted. "I had it when I was crossing the road with that pretty vixen. Kurt sent me for her, you know. Always did get everything he wanted, my dear cousin, and I nearly made a fool of myself—think of that—making a fool of yourself over a girl that doesn't care a damn—these Belgians—dirty dogs—all of them."

Heilig struggled with him in vain. It was evident that, drunk as he was, he had a perfectly clear purpose, and Heilig had either to go with him or leave him to his fate. He chose the former course.

"Very well, if you know where you lost it, then,

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for heaven's sake let's get there as soon as possible," he agreed ruefully. "I have no doubt you will get us into quod anyhow."

But Helmut was not to be hurried. He had his tale to tell, and he shouted it to the night, over and over again, alternating between a Sadistic gloating, a pure patriotism, and an appalled despair. Half an hour more had elapsed before they found themselves at the bottom of Köhler's staircase.

"It was up here," Helmut declared; "somewhere up here."

He had lowered his voice. For a moment he seemed almost sober, as though after the hurricane outside the quiet and darkness frightened him. He produced his torch and they began a stumbling, noisy ascent.

To Heilig the house appeared to be only another deserted ruin. Nothing suggested to him that there was any living thing near them. He had, on the contrary, an extraordinary consciousness of death. The closed doors which they passed on their way up hid some terrible secret.

Then at a turn of the staircase they saw a light pouring out overhead.

It stopped them, it held them for a moment silent and motionless. It was more than its brutal unexpectedness—there was something strange and significant about it. Amidst all the noise and bluster of the storm it was so quiet.

Then suddenly Helmut began to go on again slowly and deliberately, as though drawn by an irresistible fascination.

The room was almost as he had last seen it. Only the fire had burnt very low, and the man and the woman no longer faced each other. The man lay

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full length in the middle of the floor, his arms outstretched in the attitude of crucifixion, and the woman stood well away from him, looking at him.

It was Helmut who moved first. He lurched across the room. He paid no attention to Lieutenant Köhler now. His whole mind seemed concentrated on the one thing. He picked it up, gaping, stupefied.

"My bayonet," he babbled. "My bayonet."

Heilig touched the body with an experienced hand.

"Dead," he said in French. He looked up at the woman, and she nodded a grave assent.

"Yes, I killed him."

"Why?"

"You know."

"When was this?"

"Two hours ago—when that unhappy boy brought me here. I killed him at once, I have been waiting ever since."

"For whom?"

"For someone to come and take me. You will have to kill me now. I meant to kill myself." For the first time a touch of emotion coloured her voice. "I was not brave enough."

"Who knows that you have been here?"

"No one but you two."

Heilig glanced at Helmut. He had dropped down on a chair, his rusty bayonet across his knees, his face hidden in his shaking hands. They could hear him crying. "He is so young," the girl said suddenly, "so young."

Heilig did not answer her. He crossed the room, and turned down the lamp till it sputtered and went out. There was now no light but the faint glow

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that came from the dying fire. They saw each other as shadows.

"Go!" he said gently. "Go quickly, mademoiselle!"

And now there was sheer terror in her voice.

"What do you mean? What are you going to do to me? You have killed everyone—everyone; you can kill me. Isn't that enough?"

"We are going to do nothing to you, mademoiselle. We two are the only people who could speak, and we shall say nothing. Justice has been done for once. Go quickly—whilst we can save you."

"I do not wish to be saved. I have nothing left to live for."

"You are young. There's always hope—spare us another crime." He took her by the arm and led her to the door. "Go down by yourself. At the bottom wait and listen. If you hear no one passing, slip out. Here is money. I can do no more for you."

"No," she said. "Not that."

He sighed.

"Very well. God be with you."

He stood at the head of the stairs listening till her footsteps had died amidst the mutter of the wind. Then he went back.

"Come, Helmut, we've got to get out of this!" He half led, half carried him. Helmut was almost sober now, but dazed and broken with the misery of returning consciousness. Heilig closed the door softly behind them. He gave a mirthless little chuckle. "And by God, Helmutchen, if you had tried to stop her I'd have killed you with your precious bayonet," he said.

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V

The next morning a proclamation, signed by the Stadt Commandant, was posted up on the walls of the Town Hall.

A German officer had been found murdered.

The fifteen persons held by the military authorities as hostages for the good behaviour of their fellow citizens would accordingly be shot at daybreak.

Appended were the names and descriptions of the condemned.

CHAPTER VI

I

"In cold blood!" he repeated. "In cold blood!"

He shook his head with a movement of distress and incredulity as though he could hardly believe his own words. He was a plump, unsoldierly little man—an incurable civilian masquerading in a uniform, and his small, soft hands, which he held out to the fire, shook pitifully. "Yes, I have killed people," he went on in a high-pitched voice, "and God knows I was not brought up to kill people. In real life I am Kaufmann Bielefeld. I have a little haberdashery shop. In all my life I have never done anything more violent than sell gloves and stockings and buttons to ladies. Yet now I kill people. It is my duty apparently. God and our Kaiser wish it and so I obey. And it is not difficult. Either one doesn't know what one is doing or—or one gets angry. A comrade falls and one sees red and one hits out. That's easy, that's all right. But in cold blood——"

He stopped with a choking sound like a sob and there was a long silence. The five men huddled closer to the wretched fire. Three nights before the place had been a home. And even now it seemed to be clinging to its old state, denying with middle-class stolidity and heroism the possibility that these things *could* be. The elderly, kind-faced woman whose enlarged photograph still hung in the place of honour over the mantelpiece denied it smilingly. She had

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an air of friendly tolerance and self-assurance as though she was saying : "It's all right. It's all your excited imagination. Things like this can't happen to us!"

And there was a table by the window with a work-box and a child's sock peering out from under the lid. Somehow the sock made the shattered, gaping window and the rain which came trickling through the ceiling, where the charred plaster had fallen, seem absurd and unreal. Every moment a child's laughter must ring out. Madame, with her market-basket on her arm, would appear, smiling and steadfast, and the whole nightmare vanish before her.

The Kaufmann Bielefelde's companions did not answer him. They remained dull and apathetic as though their struggle against the dank, invading misery had broken them. They had not even troubled to remove their overcoats, and the room was full of steam and the sickly odour of drying clothes. The aforetime haberdasher did not seem to notice their indifference. He went on talking, in spite of himself, wrestling with some horror in his own brain.

"At first, you understand, I didn't think anything about it. After all, one doesn't think about orders. One just does as one's told—there's an end of it. It wasn't till I saw them, standing there, the fifteen of them against the wall—facing the sunlight for the last time, you understand—and then knowing I had to shoot one of them—like that—in cold blood. Just as though they had been one of those dummies we used to pot at the range—why, then—I just felt my heart turn to water—I felt I couldn't—that it couldn't be done. There was an old man just opposite—he was so like my granddad—there are greybeards like that all over the world, aren't there? We aren't the only

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people who have got nice old fellows like that, eh? And he looked at me—and I could see just how puzzled he was—as though he couldn't understand what it was all about—and I didn't know either. But I had that damned rifle in my hands, and then the lieutenant gave an order, and I took aim—yes—I took aim cool as you please—I couldn't believe it—I, Gottfried Bielefelde, taking aim at that nice old fellow—but I did—I couldn't help myself. If it had been my old granddad I couldn't have helped myself. And then it happened." He stopped again and the four men stirred uneasily and looked up at him as though something in his voice had at last broken through their insensibility. He was staring straight ahead with round, incredulous eyes.

"Well, what happened?"

"I'm telling you. There was a soldier next to the last man in the line—a queer, hard-bitten sort of fellow, not very respectable, I should say, and when the order was given he didn't move. I couldn't see him out of the corner of my eyes; he just stood there, and the lieutenant roared and came at him like a bull. But he didn't stir an eyelid. He looked the lieutenant right in the face. 'I'll have no hand in this murder,' he shouted so that we could hear. 'These people are innocent. In an hour the lieutenant Köhler was killed just by me. I'll have nothing to do with this.' And then he took his rifle—he must have been mad with rage, for he was a bit of a weakling, and he snapped it in two—though he had a good match and threw it at the lieutenant's feet. 'Now you put me up with them,' he said, 'I'll do a good company.'

"Think of that! He himself hardly believed

The lieutenant
He was like a

Towards Morning

pricked back. . . expected him to knock the fellow down, or . . . but he didn't seem to know . . . do . . . at last he just put him under arrest. . . sent him off. And all the time, you understand, that poor old gentleman had been watching, not knowing a bit what it all meant. . . not even that one of us had stuck up for him, and . . . I had stood there, with my finger on the trigger, aiming at him."

Suddenly the little haberdasher . . . his hands to . . . as though he could not . . . eyes, as though he were trying to hide from . . . self. And then there saw a big tear creep out from . . . between his fingers.

Veit Thomas laughed contemptuously.

"Ach was! Call yourself a soldier, do you?"

He shot up as though he had been struck. He took his fists. His round, red face was all twisted with grief. It was almost comical. But the laughter died suddenly in Veit Thomas's throat.

"No, I don't! I'm not a soldier, that's just it. I'm a shopkeeper. I wasn't meant for this. And don't you jeer, any of you. If you jeer I'll kill you. You've got no right; you haven't seen what I've seen; you haven't got what I've got on the soul. Look here, when the lieutenant gave the order again we were all to bits—all of us. I didn't know what I was doing; I was all dazed, stupid, shaking at the knees. Half of me wouldn't fire, and half of me had to, and that half of me pulled the trigger, and—and made a mess of it—made a mess of it, you understand. I can see him standing there now—the old man—wiping the blood off his cheek, looking at me. And there were others like that; it was like a shambles; and the lieutenant lost his head and screamed. It

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would have gone on for ever, only the Feldwebel went round with his revolver and made an end—an end—oh, my God, an end——”

They looked away from him. The fire had almost given up its feeble struggle, but they still held their stiff, blue hands out to it for warmth. Their eyes were focused beyond the grey wraith of smoke. And each man pretended to himself that he did not hear Gottfried Bielefelde crying.

At last one of them sat up, beating his knees with his fists.

“It’s no use,” he said. “It’s no use making a fuss. Of course it’s horrible. But that’s war—war means killing people. *We* shall be killed sooner or later. Meantime, it’s our business to kill them, as many as we can. The next time we come to a town they’ll be more careful. Better fifteen of them than one of us, eh?”

Veit Thomas blinked his hard little eyes.

“Anyone who pities an enemy of the Fatherland is a traitor,” he said dogmatically.

Helmut got up roughly, overturning his stool. Suddenly he realised how cold he was. The sound of that dull, terrible sobbing exasperated him. He began to tramp up and down the room, stamping his feet and beating himself with his arms. He shouted at Bielefelde:

“Shut up—shut up—can’t you?”

It was growing dusk. With every minute the cold and misery deepened about them. Helmut lifted the corner of the waterproof sheet which flapped across the window. Through the rushing veil of wind and rain he could just see the ghostly outlines of the ruins across the street. The street itself was washed empty.

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"Who was this man—this soldier?" he burst out harshly.

And wondered why he had asked.

Bielefelde lifted his poor, wet face.

"I don't know. He was new—one of the last draft—Heilig, I think he called himself."

"What's going to happen?"

Bielefeld laughed shrilly.

"What do you suppose? Do you think they'll give him an Iron Cross? He'll not see another sunset, poor devil!"

"Well, it wouldn't upset me to have a pot at him, the traitor!" Veit Thomas declared.

"Ach, stop that!"

"Why should I? What's the matter with you, Felde? Gone mad, or what? Friend of yours, p'raps?"

"Stop it, I say."

"Oh, well, I don't want to quarrel."

Helmut continued to pace up and down. He had hoped Veit Thomas would take up the challenge. He wanted to irritate these four motionless figures huddled over the dead fire. He wanted to quarrel with them. If only a row would start—with them—with anybody. When one was killing and fighting one was warm, almost happy.

It was this dank, hopeless wretchedness—this cold blood.

And suddenly, with an oath, he tore open the door and ran out headlong.

II

The man sighed and stretched himself contentedly. From where he lay on the straw bed in the corner of

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the cell he could see the door and the little bit of a window whose cross bars traced a faint crucifix against the twilight.

With the minutes the crucifix grew blacker—more real.

He sighed again, this time with a whimsical regret, and sat up, looking about him intently as though he were trying not to let a single shadow escape unnoticed. Then, seeing that he was not alone, he exclaimed irately under his breath and finally laughed.

There was a soldier seated on the bench by the door. He held a rifle between his knees. His head was thrown back against the wall, his face turned towards the gathering light in a pale immobility.

The condemned man threw a crust of bread at him.

"Helmut Felde, I've been dreaming about you. Am I still dreaming or are you an obstinate fancy or are you real?"

Helmut moved but did not look at him.

"I'm real enough."

"Good! But you weren't here last night."

"Your guard has been changed. It's quite simple."

"Oh, quite. A wonderful coincidence. But why didn't you wake me up?"

"You—you seemed to be so—so fast asleep."

"Why, so I was. What did you expect me to be? Writhing with remorse and terror? My dear boy, if you knew anything about criminals you would know that remorse is the one ailment we don't suffer from. And as to terror—why should one spoil one's last hours for something so commonplace as death? Not that I really want to die. Just now I felt a positive regret to think that I shouldn't see the sun again.

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The sun and I were great friends. Still—I wish you had woken me up. We could have had a chat—that chat I had always promised myself.”

“I didn’t come here for that.”

Heilig chuckled. He stretched himself out on the straw with his hands beneath his head in a pose of lazy content.

“I bet you didn’t. Duty, eh?”

A spark of anger, of sharp resentment, flashed up in the sullen voice.

“No, it wasn’t. I came, because I wanted to. I bribed your guard to let me take his turn.”

“You—what?”

“Hush, for God’s sake! Do you want the lot of them on top of us?”

Heilig made a gesture of apology.

“Of course I don’t. It was idiotic of me to bellow like that. But you shouldn’t spring amazing things on me. You came because you wanted to! Why did you want to? You weren’t a bit pleased with me the last time we met. You don’t want to talk to me; you don’t like the look of me apparently. Why did you come?”

“I don’t know. I had to.”

“That’s interesting. I wonder”—he smiled, his head a little on one side—“I wonder if it was because I’m a sort of souvenir—a dead and withered posy from other days—before you were a fine soldier and had done mighty and glorious deeds, when you were a little boy, an absurd little boy who butted into the tummies of notorious tyrants and loved a mongrel dog and a rag doll.”

“Oh, be quiet, can’t you? Don’t laugh. You’re always laughing—making fun of things.” He turned his gaunt white face for the first time towards the

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man curled up negligently in the straw. "It will be daybreak in a few minutes," he stammered, "and they're coming to shoot you because you are a bad German—a disloyal soldier—and you laugh."

His voice broke.

Heilig did not answer immediately. He sat up again, with his arms clasped about his knees, and through the silver dusk their eyes met and held. When he spoke at last his voice had changed. Its whimsical gaiety had become a profound sadness.

"I wasn't laughing, Helmut. Though, for myself, I could laugh easily enough. I am a sick man, and my spirit cannot bear the burden of these days. So at the bottom I am glad to go—to be out of it—to rest. All the same, I wouldn't have laughed. I couldn't laugh—because you are unhappy."

Helmut made a harsh movement of surprise and denial.

"Unhappy!"

"Yes, even although you are a good German and a loyal soldier, and are not going to die in a few minutes—unhappy. After all, what else but unhappiness brought you here? Why did you risk punishment to come? You don't approve of me, Helmut. You look almost as though you hated me——"

"You disobeyed orders," was the bitter interruption. "And you didn't even save those people. You made it worse for them, a hundred times. If you knew what happened——"

"I can guess. I didn't mean to save them. I knew I couldn't. In reality there was no need. It wasn't for them I did it."

"For whom then?"

Heilig shook his head.

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"That's what I want to tell you ; it's not easy, and I have so little time." He was abruptly silent. The distance had stirred like the leaves of a tree in a soft breeze. The sound of men's voices, the thud of marching feet wove themselves together into a faint thrilling music. Heilig leant forward a little, his eyes narrowed as though they were fixed on something far off. "Germany—Germany," he whispered. "Oh, God, they say dying men have visions; and there's the Neckar wandering in and out among the hills, and there are the little villages on the river banks, and the tall, grave fir trees, the smell of the warm summer night, and the sweet wine, and a woman by my side, and the singing :

*'Alt Heidelberg du feine,
Du stadt am Neckar reich——'*

"Oh, the dear, dear earth !"

His head dropped suddenly between his hands.

Helmut got up. He lurched heavily, clumsily to the window and listened.

"It's the 105th," he muttered. "We go forward to-morrow."

His face, lifted to the light, had the still, rapt look of a somnambulist.

The voices grew louder—faded again. It was so quiet they could hear the soft drip of the rain upon the window-sill.

Heilig shook himself. He passed his hands over his eyes like a man brushing away the lingering colours of a dream.

"Well, others will come after us," he said gently. "Others will slip down stream at midnight—others will hold hands under the stars—others will watch the moon rise over the castle. They will pick up

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happiness where mine has broken off. We must be glad of that much immortality. Helmut——"

"What is it?"

"I want you to listen a minute. It won't be easy. Will you?"

Helmut laughed roughly.

"I can't very well help myself, can I?"

"Oh, yes, you could. You could hit me over the mouth. You would even gain favour with the gods for doing so."

"Well, I shan't!"

"I want you to remember what I am going to say. You see, I have always had a soft place in my heart for you, Helmutchen—ever since you thrashed Köhler, though he was twice as strong. You filled me with admiration, you fair-headed, bullet-headed, round-eyed baby, because you'd done something that I, poor devil of a big, strong man, had never dared to do. I loved you—positively I used to have a sneaking, shameful longing to pick you up in my arms and hug you. And because I had not loved many human beings in my life it broke my heart to see how they were maiming you, twisting you out of shape, defacing your miraculous little soul. I never forgot you. You were a part of my life. And when I saw you lying there by the roadside, asleep, I felt that a crime had been done—that someone dear to me had been murdered. And I knew, too, that after all there must be justice somewhere because a crime like that couldn't go unpunished."

Helmut swung round.

"What do you mean?"

"I—a dying man—am going to tell you what I mean." He scrambled up on to his feet and they stood so close to one another that they could feel hot

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breath on their faces. And suddenly Helmut saw his companion as he had once been—young and passionate, afire with noble indignations. The whimsical scarecrowishness had fallen from him like a disguising mantle. He was old, devoured by sorrow and disease. But the passion and fire burnt splendidly in him to the end.

"When the day of despair comes, Helmut," he said, "and it must come sooner or later to you and to millions like you—when you wake up and find yourself red with blood, steeped in hideousness, outcast, detested, damned by God and men—remember what I say to you. We are a great people. Be sure of that even then. However impossible it may seem—you've got to hold on to that faith. I tell you, we are a great people. We are the people who once loved the True and the Good and the Beautiful for their own sakes. We were content to go poor and out-at-elbows. We loved our native mountains, we had no desire to crown them with any glory but that of freedom. We sought as individuals neither fame nor riches. We had joy enough when we had added our little gem of wisdom and knowledge to the world's crown—a bar to the world's music. Our history is bejewelled with men from whose garrets messages went out which will be listened to long after all this roar and tumult will be forgotten." He made a gesture of fierce sorrow. "Such we were, Helmut. But then one day the devil took us up on to a high mountain and showed us what he could give. And perhaps because we were sore with a recent drubbing from some stronger neighbour—and God knows we had drubbings enough—or perhaps because someone had laughed too loudly at our shabby ways and we had our Achilles' heel for ridicule—or perhaps just because we

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were incurably romantic—we took his offer. We sold our immortal soul for wealth, for power, for material greatness. And from that hour we sang no more immortal songs—dreamed no more dreams. Secretly, patiently, we went about our master's business. We plotted and schemed and throve until his day came, and the word was given and we broke loose upon the world—a horde of disciplined devils——”

Helmut had listened, stupefied, incredulous. Now with a cry of fury he sprang awake. This man blasphemed—he was tearing at the props which upheld the universe. He must be silenced, or it would be too late.

“You traitor! You call us that—we who are giving our lives in a holy war—in defence of our soil?”

“It is not a holy war. It is the work of hell-inspired madmen.”

“By God, Heilig, be silent, or——”

A look of vision, of proud and peaceful knowledge burnt up in the suffering face.

“But we shall win our soul again, Helmut,” he said gently. “We must—we shall. Even now, scattered amongst us, unknown and broken-hearted, there are men and women working for that redemption. It must come—years—generations hence—through blood and terror and ruin. Men will give their happiness—their lives that it shall come. I am giving my life for it—I who have failed in everything but this——” Then Helmut struck him, struck him out of unbridled terror. Heilig reeled under the blow. But his expression remained unchanged. The bloody lips smiled with a grave tenderness—“even as you may give your life, Helmutchen.”

A silence fell upon them, holding them like an

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imperious hand. They listened for that which was coming. They heard the heavy, measured tread.

A key turned in the lock. Through the dusk Helmut could see armed men standing in the corridor. An order dropped dully into the quiet.

"Remember!" Heilig muttered.

Then he was gone. It had all passed in a breath, as he would pass. He went out so strong, with so much high purpose. And in a flash he would be inert and pitiful.

And men did that to one another—every minute—for what—for whom?

Helmut stared about him stupidly. He tried to remember what had happened—what awful thing he had done. He lifted his hand because it hurt him. And he saw that there was blood upon it.

CHAPTER VII

I

"Two years of this!"

"How many years more?"

"Not many for us. Days more likely. People say to me: 'You must have a charmed life, man. Two years in the trenches and not a wound.' But I know better. If you play long enough, sooner or later your number will turn up, and the longer you've played the more the chances are piling up against you."

"Ah, but it's queer all the same to have got through like that! Look at me. Five times sent back for repairs—from Russia, Italy, Roumania—yes, I've seen a bit of the world, and each time I've paid for the trip with another bit out of myself. Herr Je!—I can hear myself creak when I move. I'm not myself any more. I'm bits of rubber and bone and skin screwed up and stuck together. I've got another man's blood in my veins. Eh, but they'll have a job with me on the Resurrection Day."

The voice laughed lugubriously.

"If only I could be warm, just for an hour."

"In the summer it's not so bad."

"In the summer one gets killed."

"They say the English will make a big offensive."

"Ach, the English."

"They are a bad people. It is their fault—all this. Our Emperor would have made peace. He

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offered them his hand, and they spat in his face. They won't be satisfied till they have destroyed us, taken our country from us. They are starving our women and children to death."

"Has anyone heard lately——?"

Someone whispered :

"I had a letter—a friend brought it in the sole of his boot—from my wife. They have not seen meat for two months, and the bread makes them sick. In my village all the old folk are dying off. That's not so bad, perhaps—they're no good any more—but the children—the children droop—they fall ill for nothing—they go out like a candle."

"I had a baby girl. I never saw it. It died. Of the colic, they said. But I know better."

"And all the young men dying——"

"Soon there will be no children left."

"No children !"

"Have *they* thought of that ?"

There was a snigger.

"They think of everything."

"You've heard, eh ?"

"In our village."

"By God, I'd go if they gave me the chance."

"It would be a duty."

"No children ! Na, that will be a fine world to go back to. I used to think it would be grand to march down our street with the band playing and the people cheering, like they did when we went away. But who'll be there now—old women and poor maimed devils like myself !"

"I can't think about going back. It's better here. One has one's comrades, one isn't alone. I wouldn't take my last leave. What was the good ? We had a jolly little home—the wife and I—I

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was earning decent pay. But what's twelve marks a month? So the home was smashed up, and the wife went into the factory. There was an accident—hundreds blown up in the air—like that; no one ever knew."

"It's queer. I had two big sons—such fine strapping fellows. I used to imagine what they would be doing long after I was dead. It was like looking forward to another life, but they're gone, and I hang on here, an old man."

"Well, I'm finished anyhow. I'm just good enough to sit here and wait for something to blow me up; but if I went back to civilian life who'd have me? Who wants a man with half his inside gone and a tin plate over his brain pan?"

"What'll be the end?"

"We shall win."

"We must—because we're in the right and God is with us."

"But if we weren't in the right——"

"Then we should have to win still more—otherwise——"

The voices dropped to whispers.

"You know, the English say we plotted this."

"That's their wicked lying. How could we have plotted it? Do they think I plotted it? Do you think I want to sit here up to my neck in mud, half-frozen, with the rats running over me?"

"Did I plot to kill my boys?"

"Or to blow my wife to pieces?"

"Or to cut out half my inside?"

They laughed. But one whisper persisted feverishly.

"Yes—but—but do you think *they* plotted it either? It's hard for them too, isn't it? It's as cold

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fifty yards away as it is here. And they're young men—they're dying too. And they had homes and sweethearts. Do you think they hated us, you and me, all that much?"

"Ach, shut up! They're devils—the English."

"Well—I don't know—perhaps. I know they tell stories at home, but here—the other night I crawled out to fetch in one of our fellows and I bumped into someone. We were both as still as mice for fear of drawing fire. But a star-shell went up, and I saw it was an English Red Cross chap. We just dropped where we stood till the light had gone; then he whispered to me in German and we helped each other reconnoitre for the fellows left over from the last attack. He gave me some brandy for my man. I don't think he would have hurt our wounded. And the next day I saw him again—he came over the parapet with the white flag—and I shot him."

"Herr Je!"

"Damn you—what's the use of groaning like that? What could I have done? You just tell me that! My officer gave the order: 'Another English swine for hell!' he said. And I'm a dead shot. If I'd refused I should have got it in the neck instead—and there's my wife at home——"

"Yes, you remember Sebold? He wouldn't—it was some woman or other—and the officer put a bullet through him there and then. And they took away the pension from his old mother, and she was turned out into the street. She died there. I know, because I tried to find her on my last leave. I was Sebold's friend, and the neighbours told me how it had happened."

Another voice intervened, soft with a southern dialect.

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"Holy Mother, what strange things please God these days!"

"At Aerschott——"

"Those women——"

"My God, how they screamed!"

"Look here, I'll tell you something. I hear them—every time I go over the top."

"Ah, stop that!"

The strange chorus died away into the darkness. Disembodied spirits they might well have been speaking from their separate hells of the things they had done and suffered there—without protest, without anger, as though from the omnipotent power that held them there could be no appeal.

A voice began again, dispassionately:

"What's the good of talking? We can't help it. If we don't do as we're told, if we don't believe it's right, what's going to become of us? What's the good of us? We've nothing to go back to. We can't go back. On our own showing most of us here are finished with. We've done things ordinary folk can't do. It was our duty—but we've damn well got to pay for it. We'll never be like other people again. We'll never be able to live their lives. I remember what our captain said when we marched out: 'When you were a civilian,' he said, 'you could do this but you couldn't do that—this was right and that wasn't. Well, now you're soldiers and all that's gone. You've only one thing to judge by—if it's a good thing for Germany then it's right, and you're a fine fellow for doing it, no matter what it is.'"

"Ah, that's true!"

"No use worrying one's head."

"Better get what one can out of it whilst the fun lasts."

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"You wait, if ever I get out of this hole again I'll paint things red."

A footstep squelching in the mud outside silenced them. A light flashed. Like a round, bright eye it passed inquisitively from face to face. They cringed away from it, blinking and resentful, as though the sudden revelation of themselves shamed them; as though in that concealing darkness they had imagined themselves as less hideous, less utterly miserable.

They could not see the figure behind the light—only a hand and a slip of paper:

"Gefreite Felde!"

"Zu Befehl, Herr Feldwebel!"

A man crawled out from the huddled circle. He was bearded, unkempt, and filthy. He had to stoop so as not to strike the roof of the dug-out with his head. He stood there, morose and patient, like some Norse giant trapped in a cave of earthmen, whilst the light flashed over him.

"Good. You're to come with me."

"Jawohl, Herr Feldwebel."

The light blinked itself out.

They listened to the cautious receding footsteps.

"Wonder where he's gone?"

"God knows. He'll not come back."

"Well, at least he's out of this."

They huddled closer to one another, shivering and muttering.

II

It was strange to be in a room again. Such an immaculate room, nothing superfluous, everything in its place everywhere a shining cleanliness. And a bright fire burning in the grate. It was strange, too,

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to realise that people still existed, like this little doctor in his neat service uniform, his blue eyes twinkling good-humouredly behind his glasses as though the whole world were as comfortable and spruce as himself.

Helmut stood stockishly on the other side of the table and stared, and the blue eyes stared back, half-interested, half-disgusted, as one stares at some grotesque, slightly repulsive animal.

"Just out of the trenches, eh?"

"Jawohl, Herr Stabsarzt."

"Glad?"

"Jawohl, Herr Stabsarzt."

"Wondering what I want with you?"

Helmut indicated by a look of stupid indifference that it was not his business to wonder. Actually he had not thought about it. He could experience short, hot desire and blank satiety, but wonder and speculation had passed long since over his horizon.

The doctor laughed and ran a beautifully manicured finger-nail down a printed list.

"Well, perhaps I've got a nice piece of news for you. Ah, here we are. 'Gefreite Helmut Felde, No. 3705, D Company, Regiment Königin Louise. No. 45. Field conduct excellent. Recommended for the Iron Cross. Unwounded. Medical record first class. Well built. Height six feet, chest measurement 42.' Not at all bad, my son; not at all bad. Let's see what we could do for such a fine specimen. Badener, aren't you?"

"Jawohl, Herr Stabsarzt."

"Very well. I'm going to give you a fortnight of your native mountains. Wait a moment. Ah, I have it. We try to arrange these things with due regard to localities—the Althof, Embach, Black Forest. A

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beautiful district. And you will have a charming hostess, I have no doubt."

Seeing Helmut's face he burst out laughing.

"Then—then I am not to go home, Herr Stabsarzt."

The doctor leant his chin on his hand. As suddenly as it had come the laughter died out of him. His eyes had become hard, with a look of cruel penetration which awoke a faint, indefinable memory.

"My young friend, understand me; you are not on leave, you are going to this place on duty, on strict military duty. Get that into your dull head. You are going to be quartered at this farm—on this woman—because there are no young men left in the whole district. There never will be any young men there again for twenty years. They have been wiped out. It is our business to repopulate that district, to provide a new generation which will carry on the mighty task which we have begun—a young Germany." He stopped with a shrug as though angry at his own display of passion. "In the ordinary course of events, Gefreite, you would marry and have children. That event has now become improbable. You may be injured—killed. Your children would then be lost to your country. We have to provide against that contingency. That is why you are going to Embach."

Helmut had not lowered his eyes, and yet, for a moment, he could not see the face opposite him. It swam in a throbbing mist.

"Herr Stabsarzt—does she know?"

"She will be informed that a soldier is to be quartered on her. According to my notes here, she is young, single, with no men-folk. The brother

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and owner of the Althof was killed last year. You should have no trouble. No doubt as a good German she will realise her duty. In any case, a young fellow like you——"

The doctor blinked his eyes till they were two dots of light.

"Herr Stabsarzt——"

"That's enough." Again the hard flash. "I am not here to discuss it with you. You have your orders. Make no mistake about it, you are as much on duty up there in that peasant's farm as you are in the trenches. You serve the Fatherland equally; you will be held as responsible. And we are not deceived. Make no mistake about that either. You are granted a privilege because you are young and healthy—play no fool's tricks with it. And remember, there is to be no question of marriage or promise of marriage. This is a war measure only. Now off with you." He mingled a gesture of dismissal with a return of his first good-humour. "And wash your face, my son," he laughed, "so that the lady may see what a handsome fellow you are."

Helmut saluted.

"Jawohl, Herr Stabsarzt!"

In the ante-room other soldiers were waiting. They were young men. They looked up at him with a veiled questioning in their eyes, with the flicker of unclean laughter on their lips.

A red wave seemed to rush up through his whole body to his face. And yet he was cold, so cold that his knees shook under him. He had felt like that in his first bombardment in the trenches. Fear! Afraid! What of? Wasn't it a stroke of luck? And hadn't one always known of this? Hadn't one whispered and laughed about it—joked?

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"Better get what one can out of it whilst the fun lasts."

The Feldwebel who guarded the door of the doctor's room nudged him wickedly.

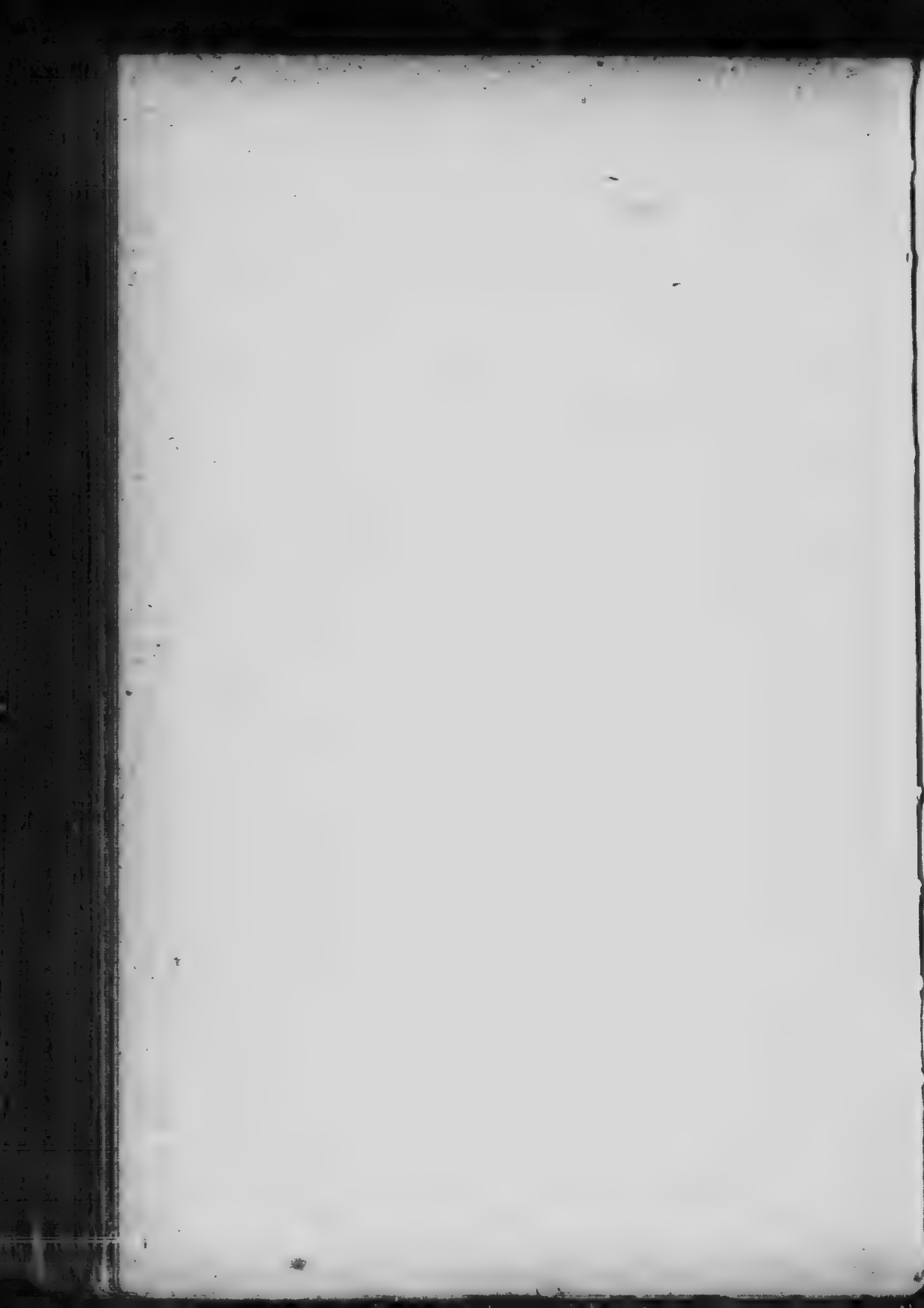
"Na, can we congratulate, Herr Bräutigam?"

It was a second before he answered, and yet in himself the silence had been interminable.

He burst out into a stupid laugh.

"Congratulate the Fatherland, Herr Feldwebel.
'*Das Vaterland mag ruhig sein.*'"

He went out into the winter's morning, with his hands in his pockets, swaggering and winking.



PART IV

CHAPTER I

I

THE little mountain train had come to its journey's end.

For three hours, ever since it had left Friberg it had toiled stolidly upwards, biting its tooth hard on the grooved rail, muttering and clanking, sending up shrill cries of defiance as the winding track grew steeper. It had tunnelled through the breadth and height of mountains and climbed precipices and hung dizzily on the brink of chasms—a lonely, heroic black speck in a floating indefinite world of white and grey. Once its steady course had been checked when, from an invisible wall of rock, an avalanche of snow had flung itself down headlong so that, looking ahead, one could see nothing but a white frozen torrent—no one knew how deep. The engine-driver, the guard and the solitary passenger had scrambled down and consulted together whilst the noiseless legions had whirled between them, veiling them from one another, muffling their voices, softly but irresistibly, obliterating them, until all at once without apparent reason they had scrambled back to their places, and the little engine had churned and buffeted her way through, yet less stolidly, as though she too had begun to be afraid.

And now she stood at the end of her journey, patient and unexultant, with the snow to her axles and the sweat trickling from her black flanks.

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The soldier passenger lumbered down on to the platform. The white flying cloud exaggerated him so that standing there, motionless in uncertainty, he loomed up as something monstrous and mysterious. At first he believed himself alone, and the loneliness had become familiar—not less disquieting. All the way up it had been the same; the empty platforms, the chill air of desertion and ruin. It was other than the desertion and ruin which he knew. For it had come slowly, insidiously, a thing of decay rather than of violence; a pitiful withering at the roots, a sad surrender to a slow-moving, inevitable death.

He stamped his feet in the thick snow and shouted impatiently. He could see nothing, not even the road which must be close at hand. The mountains hid behind their flowing shrouds. But he could feel them near him. He could feel their shadow resting on him.

"Donnerwetter! Is there no one here?"

Two figures answered. They seemed to spring out of nothing. One was the old and doddering guard, the other a peasant, massively built and powerful still for all that rot had set its devouring mark upon him. He towered up like some ancient stronghold that time and ill-fortune had battered into ruin—not into surrender. For a moment the two men neither moved nor spoke. They stared at Helmut, and he knew that the guard had fetched his companion to look at him, as though he were some strange phenomenon in their lives. The peasant shambled closer, his deep-set, rheumy eyes peering eagerly into Helmut's face.

"So," he muttered, "it's over—over at last."

"What's over?"

"The war—the war."

Towards Morning

"No, by God it isn't!"

"Not over? Then why are you here? No young man comes to Embach now. Not over? Why not—why not?"

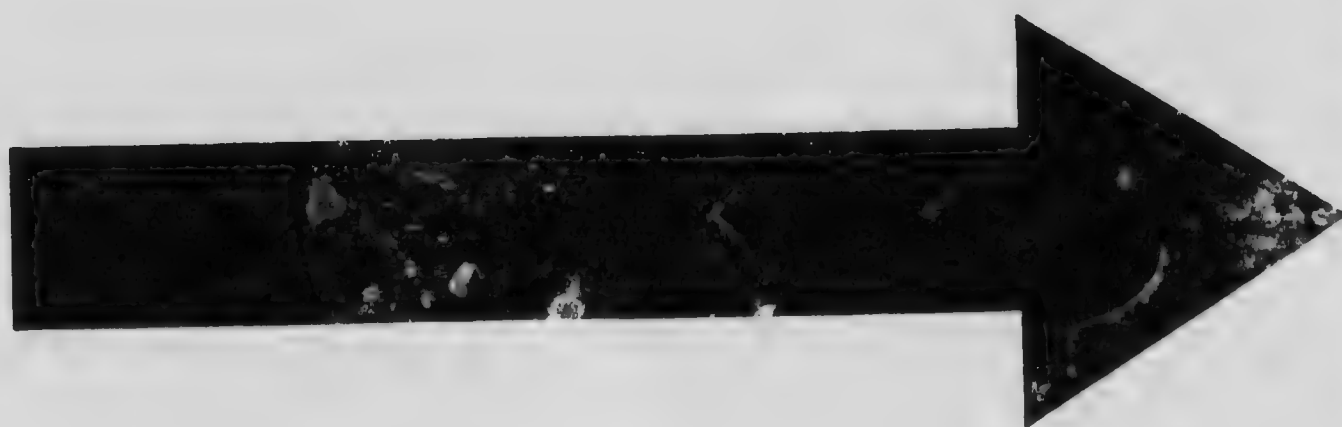
Helmut laughed shortly.

"Ask someone else. Ask the English."

"Ah—ha—the English—yes——" The heavy-jowled, shrunken face grew suddenly sallow. He lifted a clenched, menacing fist. "Yes, you soldiers go too softly with them. You're too merciful, that's what it is. They're vermin. One oughtn't to have any mercy on vermin. One ought to stamp them out. Besides, they're cowards. If you showed your teeth at them they'd run away. Everyone says so. Then why don't they run?" His voice rose to a querulous cry. "Why don't they run? Why don't they leave us alone? It's because you don't fight properly. You're a lazy, over-fed lot. You're too comfortable, too easy-going. If I were out there I'd put fear into them, I'd strangle them with my bare hands. I'd tear them to pieces. I'd—I'd——" He stopped, coughing, and then with a sudden change of tone he came nearer, wagging his head significantly.

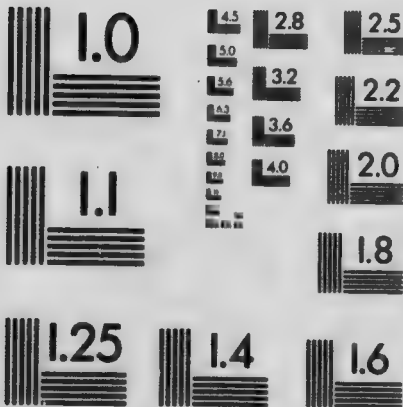
"If they'd only listened to what I said—I told them about the English. They used to come up here every summer, nosing about and playing the friendly. And because they spent a lot of money the poor fools in the village were taken in. But I knew—I knew they were up to no good. There was a man always poking about my farm—asking questions. He wanted it; he knew it was the biggest in these parts. I shouldn't be surprised if he were at the bottom of all this."

Helmut shook off the hand upon his arm. He had a sudden desire to get away from these two



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spectral old man. He had a feeling that they had crawled out of their graves to speak with him.

"I dare say. But it's infernally cold standing here."

The peasant drew his tattered skin coat closer about him.

"Ay, cold—cold. Always cold. When will it be over? You tell me that!"

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Because it must be over in the spring. It must." He blinked encouragingly. "You've only got to show your teeth and they'll run away. Everyone says so."

He turned and lumbered heavily into the driving snow.

The old guard struck a match and, shielding it carefully, lit his lantern. Under its eye the falling flakes turned to gold.

"Old Thomas used to be the richest Grossbauer in these parts," he said. "But that's all gone. Everything. In the spring the Jews will have him. He used to come down here every day to meet the trains and the young men on furlough. But the young men grew fewer and fewer. They don't come any more now. They are all dead. No one comes. The train wouldn't run if it wasn't for carrying the wood down for the military." He peered up at Helmut wonderingly, with a kind of awe. "You're not from these parts, young soldier?"

"No, but I am going up to the Althof."

"Ah, to the Bäuerin Hildebrandt?"

"Yes."

"You are perhaps a relation?"

A stiff smile relaxed Helmut's frozen lips. He turned his head away, answering evasively:

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"I am quartered up there, on duty. Show me the way."

The guard lifted his lantern as though its feeble yellow ray could break through the flying twilight.

"She is a strange girl, the Bäuerin up at Althof," he said. "There was a time when we shunned her like a witch and the children ran after her, calling names. But now—now things she said come back to us. We would forgive and forget, perhaps, but she holds aloof; ever since her brother was killed she has not spoken to anyone. But once a week she comes down to the village cross and leaves a basket with farm produce for the sick children. Alas, it has grown smaller and smaller."

"Show me the way," Helmut interrupted roughly.

The old man pointed with his shaking hand.

"You go straight through the village, and at the last cottage you turn up to the left into the Schlängental. There is no road, just a clearing through the forest. The storm is coming on. The snow will be waist deep up there, and in an hour it will be quite dark. Better wait until the morning."

"No, I shall manage." He laughed again. "I tell you, I have business up at the Althof."

The guard turned the light on to his companion's face.

"It is strange to see a young man in these parts," he said wistfully. "We are old people, all of us—even the children. Tell me, do you think it will be over soon?"

"I tell you—I don't know."

"Yes, it is foolish to ask. It has become a habit—like poor old Thomas. What does it matter to us now?"

Helmut strode on alone. His limbs were stiff

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and painful from the long, bitter journey, and the burden of his equipment weighed hard on his aching shoulders. But he walked rapidly, and the movement and the loneliness were at first sweet to him. And he was free—masterless. In all this white world there was no law but his will—his pleasure. He laughed to himself and began to sing. But the snow choked his lips. It caught his voice in its soft hold and bore it down under a smothering silence.

He could just see the straggling cottages on either side of the wide street; their outlines melted into the grey, sickly daylight. They were dark and quite silent. They seemed to him oddly unreal, as the dead seem unreal. He felt that if he went up to them they would vanish, crumble into nothing.

He met no one. And he thought suddenly and unaccountably of the dense forest that lay invisible behind the mist and snow—of its depths where the birds never sang.

But at the last cottage something living showed itself. It was so little and so old. It came after him with a sort of hopping movement, like that of a lame bird. And it made a chirping sound, thin and quavering.

"Ernst—Ernstchen!" Her eyes peered up at him and he saw that they were blind. The hands that clung to him were like claws, they were so withered and fleshless. "Ernstchen—my little Ernst——"

He frowned impatiently. He had almost forgotten fear. But old women frightened him. Old women were terrible.

"I am not your Ernst, let me go."

She mumbled over his hand. She rubbed her withered cheek against his sleeve.

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"My own little Ernst, what a long, long time you've been."

He shook her off then and went on faster—up through the clearing into the valley. But he could hear her piping voice calling after him :

"My little Ernst ! "

II.

Soon he had reached the head of the narrow Schlagenthal. The pale mountain heights loomed up out of their white invisibility to watch him. They came nearer, closing on him like the hands of a kindly giant on some little creeping thing. And presently they hid him. He walked in their twilight, through which the snow fell softly, incessantly.

He had no choice but to go where the opening through the forest led him. It wound steeply upwards, and his smoking breath came painfully and his limbs dragged themselves more and more slowly from the clinging drifts. The cold hurt. It was different from the cold he had endured—keen and austere as tempered steel. He had no armour against it. And he was tired. His pack weighed monstrously upon his shoulders. The untroubled bed of snow tempted him.

And often he stood still to rest and to listen to the silence. The silence, too, was strange and unfamiliar. It seemed to be creeping up all about him. When he had looked back, down into the shadow whence he had come he had a feeling that it was there, just out of sight, smoothing out his footprints, cutting him off from the world he knew. The tall fir trees with their branches bowed under their white burden and the little fir trees at their feet peering, like gnomes, from under their hoods, held him in the

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same mute watchfulness. And as this static, mysterious life touched his consciousness he became troubled. He had lived so long with the herd, in vital proximity with his fellows, touching them, hearing them night and day, drawing his courage, his warmth, his very thoughts from theirs. And now he was cut off—alone in this silence. With every step he took he climbed deeper into its fastness, farther from men.

He tried to sing again, an old marching song that had held dying men in the ranks, but the sound of his voice startled him as something unexpected and unnatural. It vibrated interminably through the stillness. He plunged on faster away from it, furious at his own alarm, but the snow checked him. It held him back. It crushed him under its soft weight. It seemed to be drawing him down, gently, irresistibly into itself. In a little while he would be submerged.

And night waited among the trees. The silvery whiteness faded into grey—into sable. And as yet there was no sign of his destination. He began to doubt himself. He must have missed some turning. It seemed impossible that this desolate, untrodden track could lead to any human life. He stood still at last, panting, exhausted, peering uneasily about him.

And then he saw the footprints. For a moment he remained motionless, staring at them. They thrilled him like a friendly voice, a sudden friendly touch. He stumbled up to them. They stopped short under the shadow of a pine, and then turned back. There was a double track—the one firm and deep, the other blurred, as though someone had fled—stumblingly.

A woman's footprints.

Towards Morning

And he was not afraid any more. He laughed out loud. He sent an exultant "view halloo" into the shivering dusk. He lifted his helmet and waved it in ironic salutation. The aching weariness dropped from his limbs. His heart leapt in him and his blood grew hot in riotous delight. He began to run. He was like a dog on some keen scent. All the eerie stirrings of fear and awe were lost in a primitive urge—in the fierce lust of pursuit and capture. He had a thirsty vision of his quarry standing for an instant like a frightened doe under the trees, listening to the footfalls of her destiny, of the swift turn, of the headlong, futile flight.

It made him laugh again. It flicked his appetite. It was good hunting with a sure end in sight.

The footprints left the clearing. They twisted in and out among the trees, through the densest undergrowth. It amused him, this childish effort to escape. He pictured her with stupid, tear-filled eyes and quivering mouth. He shouted after her gaily, tauntingly. But there was no answer. Only once, when he stopped to listen, he thought he heard the distant cracking of a twig.

The darkness favoured her. He had to bend almost double to keep his hold on the flying footprints. And little by little an anger rose in him. He ceased to laugh and shout. He pressed on grimly plunging through the undergrowth, letting the branches of the tress swing back and tear him with their frozen whips, stumbling, falling and rising again in a maddened silence. But every blow and every fall, whilst they infuriated him, sapped his strength. He was growing rapidly exhausted. He knew it, and thwarted desire and a galling sense of defeat covered his eyes with a red blindness. If he

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had come upon her then he would have shot her down—strangled her.

He began to throw away his equipment, his rifle, his pack, then the heavy, clogging overcoat. He cursed wildly, and every curse tore a breath from his tortured lungs.

And now it was almost night. The footprints in the snow grew fainter. He missed them—found them again for the last time. Then they faded out utterly.

He stood still. The knowledge that he was lost fell upon his heat and excitement like a chill mist. The silence had become terrible. It was closing faster—it was at his feet, rising about him. If he waited there it would close over him. He began to move on again, but slowly, blunderingly, without purpose. He had lost all sense of direction. He moved because he dared not stand still, and the deadly cold bit through his tunic to his very heart.

There was movement in the darkness. Things touched him with light, tentative fingers. The snow that brushed against his face was sentient, alive. He tried to fight it off. Old stories of his childhood came crowding out of his memory—stories of deep drifts and of men who had wandered through the forest till sleep found them, of will-o'-the-wisps, bright, malevolent spirits. The red patch ahead of him was one of them. Against it the branches stood out blackly like the bars of a prison. It came and went. And then suddenly it steadied. It looked at him.

He had come out on to a clearing and above him, on a shelving bank, he saw her. She held a lantern in her hand, and across the bridge of light they stared at each other, the snow whirling between them. It seemed to him that she was immense, tall and slender as the pines.

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He shouted to her—a threat, an appeal—he hardly knew. The light vanished. She was gone as suddenly as she had come. But with a fresh, short-lived rush of strength he clambered up the frozen bank. In the luminous mist that rose from the white earth he saw whence she had come, the squat, long shadow of a peasant's *Hof*. The windows were blank and desolate. He flung himself against the closed door. An hour before he would have crashed it down with the butt of his rifle, with the weight of his shoulders. He would have burst through exulting.

"Let me in! Let me in!" he gasped brokenly.

There was no answer but the low growl of a dog. He beat against the stout panels, clawing them with his broken, bleeding hands. He leant against them at last, muttering and sobbing like a beaten child.

The silence that had waited so long laid hold of him and drew him down gently, resistlessly, into itself.

III

The first thing he saw was the old majolica stove blinking at him with its red eye.

Often on a winter's afternoon he had fallen asleep over his lessons in the plush arm-chair and had woken up in the dark—just like this—and stared the stove out of countenance. There had been a sort of contest between them as to who should blink first. And usually the stove had won and he had fallen asleep again until his mother had come in with the lamp.

"Na, Helmut, finished with your geography?"

But to-night she was a long time coming. His eyes closed heavily in spite of himself, and he drifted out on to a warm darkness. He did not exactly

Towards Morning

sleep. All the time he was conscious of himself and of his own happiness. He could not remember ever having been so happy. He had been very tired, extraordinarily tired, and now every bit of him was relaxed—at rest. He seemed to be wrapped round in softness and warmth and quiet. He was careful not to move lest something should break the ecstasy of it all.

When he heard the door open and his mother's slow footsteps came towards him, his heart stood still. He was frightened, but with a new fear. It had nothing to do with his geography or his exam, or anything that usually made his heart stand still. It was quite new. It was as though she were coming to tell him something wonderful, something that he had been waiting for her to say to him for years and years. And he lay still with closed eyes, all his being in suspense.

It was rapturous, indescribably beautiful, this waiting. There was magic in that soft step, in the gentle rustle of her dress. He could feel her warmth, a warmth fragrant with some familiar, nameless sweetness. He felt the light on his face. Her hand touched him. It drew the clothes over his bare breast.

So he was in bed. It was really night. But then there was no majolica stove in his bedroom.

And suddenly in the shock of remembrance he looked up at her.

Long, long they remained motionless, gazing at one another. He did not know what happened in him. He knew its significance. The last echo from the hot tumult of his life faded. The lights had gone down and the curtain was rising slowly.

She gave no sign. Her face was grave, inscrut-

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able, and the hand that held the candle did not tremble. She turned away at last without a word. Her shadow passed between him and the winking firelight out into the next room. He watched her steadily. The door remained open, and he could see her moving about in the oblong strip of light. He saw her take something from the bosom of her dress. She looked at it and then suddenly back into his darkness. And what he saw on her face he could not understand.

She sat down at the head of the table, confronting him, upright, motionless. She could not see him, but her gaze was fixed darkly and unflinchingly on the black open doorway. Unknown to her his eyes met hers and held them.

He drowsed at last. And in his dream he still saw her sitting there, her hand clasped on the old-fashioned revolver—waiting.

CHAPTER II

WHEN he woke up again she had gone.

He lay still for a minute, trying to remember. He was almost sure that she had never really been there, that she was a fancy that had faded with the daylight. There was a chill emptiness and stillness about him, as though he had been a long time alone.

The uncertainty drove him to full wakefulness. He pushed the rough blankets from him and got up painfully. His limbs ached, and his body felt too heavy. He wondered if he had been ill and for how long. A limitless stretch of unreality seemed to lie between now and that nightmare hour in the forest. Then he saw his tunic on a chair before the stove, and when he touched it he felt that it was still faintly damp.

So it was all true. It had all happened. The tunic bore silent witness to her. He thought wonderingly how strong she must be to have been able to carry him in and undress him. Yet very gentle. Though she had fled from him and barred her door against him, in the end she had had compassion.

And afterwards she had sat there with her hand upon the revolver. . . .

He felt a distant tingling of his nerves, like life returning to a frozen limb.

He dressed slowly and went into the adjoining room. There was no sign of her. But a sense of

Towards Morning

warmth and comfort strengthened in him. The atmosphere touched him like a bar of old, half-forgotten music. It was so long since he had been in a home not ravaged by despair and hatred. Peace lived here—had always lived here. Once fat hams had hung from the low, smoke-blackened rafters, and the cupboards had been stored with richness. Generations of proud, self-sufficient peasants had smoked their pipes on the bench about the stove and eaten their heavy meal at the round table between the windows. And afterwards they had taken down the great Bible from its niche and read aloud in their sonorous tongue.

Their faded photographs hung on the wall; massive, powerful men in their native dress, in quaint, old-fashioned uniforms of fifty years back, with the German and Badische flags crossed over their heads.

And underneath in flowing letters was written :
"Für Kaiser und Vaterland."

They had gone. They had taken their prosperity with them. The hooks in the rafters were barren and the cupboards gaped a tragic emptiness. But the pride remained. It spoke still in the gleaming brass pans upon the shelf, in the shining oak table, carved with an unconscious art by the dead hands, in the austere cleanliness.

Invisibly it challenged him.

There was another portrait—a modern one—hanging by itself. He went up to it and considered it intently. The boyish face under the stern military helmet looked back at him with a strange expression. It was as though at the moment when the picture had been taken the sitter had tried hard to hide a lurking, indescribable horror.

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Someone had written underneath :

"Hans Hildebrandt. Infanterie Regiment
Königin Louise. No. 45. Killed before Lüttich,
1914."

Suddenly Helmut remembered.

And at the same moment a shadow passed over the window and the outer door opened, letting in a breath of icy air.

He turned. He saw her first only as a dark figure outlined against the gleaming white background. For an instant she stood looking towards him, but he could not see her expression. A lean old wolfhound came in from behind and advanced, growling ominously.

The sound roused her. She called the dog to heel and closed the door with a firm, deliberate movement. Helmut had heard her voice for the first time. It was deep-toned and soft as an organ note.

But she gave him no direct word of greeting. She carried the bowl of milk to the table and set it down. It was as though she were totally indifferent to his presence. And his feeling of content flashed round to an angry antagonism.

He plunged his hands into his pockets, measuring her with a deliberate insolence:

"Well?"

She met his eyes calmly.

"I did not expect you to be awake," she said. "You were so fast asleep."

"I was fairly all in last night," he admitted sullenly. "I had been three days on the journey, pretty well without food, and the last lap finished me. I lost my way in the forest"—he laughed—"thanks to you." She did not answer. She had begun to prepare a meal, and her face was half averted. He

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took a step towards her. "You weren't very hospitable at first, were you?" he asked significantly.

"I hoped that you would lose yourself," she said. "I hoped that you would die out there."

He stopped short. She said it so quietly. But the sheer courage of it caught his breath. He laughed again to cover over the moment's discomfiture.

"That wasn't very friendly, either. Not much of a reception for a brave defender, eh?"

"You are not my defender."

"Well, I've done my best, I can tell you. Where would you be if it wasn't for us men? Haven't we fought for you—for our homes and our women-folk?"

She turned to look at him. She was tall, and their eyes met almost on a level.

"You do not defend us," she said. "Some of you fight to please yourselves, and some of you because you must. And you bring ruin and sorrow wherever you go."

"Women's talk!" he jeered.

"Yes, it is women's talk," she admitted.

He watched her as she moved about, and an unwilling admiration mingled with his resentment. Her figure in the simple peasant's dress had the svelte grace and freedom of some untamed forest thing. She carried her youth proudly. He liked the shape of her head so fearlessly revealed by the brown hair, smoothed back and coiled in thick plaits about her ears. He liked its set upon the slender neck. And the brown arms that came out from the short linen sleeves were strong and shapely. He could see the hardened muscles rippling under the skin.

He thought suddenly of how his comrades would have nudged him and laughed:

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"Na, Felde! Lucky devil——!"

A dark colour rushed up to his eyes. He turned away so that she should not see.

"I expected some sort of talk like that," he said roughly. "They told me about you down in the village. You got yourself into trouble with the things you said—disloyal things."

"That was a long time ago. I have not spoken to anyone——"

"—not since your brother was killed."

He saw her catch her breath like someone who is suddenly stabbed with an old pain.

"How did you know that?"

"They told me. Why did you keep away like that?"

"I wanted to be alone."

"It was no life for a woman. You must have been afraid."

"Afraid?" She gave him one of her long, steady glances. "There is nothing to be afraid of when one is alone."

He stirred uneasily.

"Well, it must have been pretty dreary, anyway."

"Oh, no. Not that, either. You don't understand. There is a lot of life up here—underneath—all about one. When one is alone one gets nearer and nearer to it. You couldn't understand."

"Why couldn't I?"

"You have lived too much with people."

He shook his head, smiling at her.

"You're a strange person. You're just a girl, and yet there's something queer about you, as though you knew things—something mysterious. Have you been talking with the fairies?"

He did not know why he had said it. It was like

Towards Morning

a sudden flash of memory that came and went before he knew what it was. He fancied that the shadow of an answering smile touched her lips.

"What do *you* know about fairies?"

"Oh, don't you be so superior. My home isn't far from here—at Karlstadt. I had an old nurse who came from these parts, and she used to tell me things——" He broke off. "You know down in the village they say you are a witch. I believe it's true."

She did not answer. Her manner was again aloof and grave. When she spoke it was as though she had not heard him.

"I've only poor fare to offer you," she said. "In my brother's day it was different. Now a little milk and an egg and potato-bread is our best. I used to be able to get a hare sometimes—there are a lot of them down in the meadows—but all my powder and shot are gone."

"Except one charge, eh?" She started violently, and he came a step nearer. "Give me what you are hiding in your dress," he said.

He did not expect her to obey. He expected denial, prevarication. The resolve to force the issue now and at once had come upon him suddenly. It was as though he realised that there was danger in the quiet that was between them. To his amazement she accepted the challenge instantly. She swung round, her back to the wall, the revolver in her hand. And there was no misreading her expression now. A hot admiration for her daring rose out of the recognition that through his under-estimation of her he had put himself at her mercy.

"Come," he said good-humouredly. "You aren't much of a patriot, are you? After all, I'm not

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enemy. I'm open to reason. Only you've got to trust me, and prove that you trust me. If I swear to you on my word of honour as a German soldier that I will return it to you at once, without touching you, will you give me that revolver?"

His voice was quiet and reasonable. Yet again he did not expect her to obey. It had been a mere ruse to gain time. She looked at him for a moment, her eyes veiled and inscrutable, and then laid the weapon quietly on the table between them.

And now there was contempt in his laughter.

He took the old-fashioned fire-arm and emptied out the cartridge into his hand. He made her a deep, satirical bow.

"I keep my word, Mademoiselle."

Her face betrayed neither fear nor surprise nor resentment. But there was something sorrowful in the gesture with which she took the revolver back from him.

"They taught you that," she said, almost to herself.

He ignored her. There was nothing more to fear now. He could bide his time. He sat down at the table and motioned her curtly to take the place opposite him. She obeyed, and yet there was an unbroken strength in her docility, as though behind it she held a weapon. She motioned aside the share of food which he pushed towards her.

"I have already breakfasted."

He did not believe her, but he was past caring. He ate wolfishly, not speaking, hardly aware of her until the last crumb had vanished. There was no hurry. In this narrow, lonely world he had become master.

"It's months since I sat at a decent table," he

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declared at last, pushing back his chair with a sigh of content. "And I don't know when I last spoke to a woman in my own tongue. I've forgotten."

"Your mother?" she suggested.

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, perhaps it was my mother. That was on my last leave, a year ago. She will be surprised to hear how near I've been."

"You will go and see her?"

"No. I am not on leave." He waited for her to speak—to question him. He wanted to throw the truth into her quiet face. But she was silent. Her eyes were lowered, and he felt rather than saw that they were distended, as though with a secret, painful thought.

"What are you staring at?" he asked abruptly.

"Your hands."

He looked down at them. They lay there clenched on the table in a gesture of arrogant content—strong and scarred and brutal. He had an odd feeling of surprise, as though they did not belong to him; as though he saw them for the first time.

"Well, what's the matter?"

"I was thinking of what they have done."

He stared at her, but she seemed sunk in her own vision, and suddenly he sprang up, pushing his chair back violently.

"They have done their duty," he muttered. "That's all that matters."

"What was their duty?" she asked.

"To obey."

"To obey!" Her lip curled in irrepressible scorn. "To do everything they are told—even wicked things!"

"A soldier who obeys does nothing wicked."

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She gave a low exclamation.

"I would never be a soldier."

"You are a woman. Yet even you have your duty. Even you will have to submit."

He went over to the window and stood looking out sombrely. It had stopped snowing, but the sky hung grey and surcharged over the trees. Again he waited for her to cry out, to protest, to rouse the demon that would release him. But she was quite quiet.

"I'm going out to see if I can find my things," he said at last. "You will wait here."

Then she moved. She stood between him and the door.

"You're coming back?"

"Yes."

"Even though I ask you to go away and leave me—in peace?"

He leant forward and caught her by the arm. He drew her close to him, so that he could feel her breath on his cheek.

"Even if I didn't want to come back I should have to. Do you understand?"

They remained motionless, staring into each other's eyes. She did not falter. He had a strange feeling that in that duel she was drawing his strength from him, that the very marrow of his bones was melting under her touch.

Violently, almost in terror, he flung her from him, and went out, crashing the door to behind him.

CHAPTER III

I

It was dusk when he scrambled back up the ice-bank, his haversack slung over his shoulder and a dead hare dangling from the muzzle of his rifle. He gave an exclamation of relief. He had learnt to fear night in the forest, and in the purple vapour which drifted over the mountains it would have been easy to miss the Althof altogether. The snow lay feet thick on the deep thatched roof and reached up to the level of the window ledges, so that house and forest were fused in an unbroken whiteness.

But the windows were alight. They shone out like warm, friendly eyes, and the long slender icicles that hung from the eaves twinkled in their light like golden eyelashes.

He almost believed that the eyes were watching for him.

"A witch's cottage!" he thought grimly.

To-night the door was not barred against him. He entered freely. The old wolf-hound rose and limped to meet him, sniffing at his outstretched hand. A candle burnt on the table, and the stove threw a red glow over the room, catching bright glances from the polished coppers. It shone into her face as she bent over her work.

He had entered blustering and storming. He had expected opposition and hatred, had prepared to meet them, rejoiced in them. But now the quiet

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and warmth laid gentle, restraining hands on him. It was as though he had blundered roughly into a room where children lay asleep.

"You—you look so peaceful," he muttered.

She had glanced up quickly, and again there had been a look on her face which he could not read. It was as though something had leapt up in her, something joyful, and then, seeing him, had crept back, hiding from him.

"Peace is all that is left now," she said. "You will have to share our nothing. I have no food for either of us."

"It doesn't matter." He was still brooding over what he had seen. "I've eaten my iron rations. I don't want anything."

"But you said you had had no food for three days?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I tell you, I don't want anything. I'm not hungry." He closed the door against the bitter twilight but he did not come farther into the room. "My things are all wet and dirty," he said. "I remember—women like to keep things clean."

"I don't mind. I'm accustomed. You see, my brother used to come home——" She broke off, flinching. "Please give me your coat and I will hang it up before the fire in your room. It is only wet. There is no mud up here in the mountains."

"In the trenches there is mud, though. We used to wallow in it like pigs in a trough." He gave an awkward laugh. He had a strange desire to bring that look back into her face. "You see, I've been thinking of to-morrow's supper. When I found my rifle safe and sound I went down to the meadows and hid myself behind a tree. And sure enough presently

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this fat fellow popped out. He seemed to know that you were short of powder, and he didn't think much of me. He didn't know I was the crack sniper in the regiment——" He stopped, conscious of the sudden whiteness of her face. "Why do you mind like that?" he burst out angrily.

She took the stiff furry body from him and passed her hand over it with a lingering tenderness.

"I couldn't help thinking—seeing you—waiting for some man——"

"War is war," he answered largely, "and there are things in life bigger than life."

"Yes, I know."

"One's Fatherland——"

"And love and pity."

"One's Fatherland is above everything."

"It can't be above God."

He laughed at her.

"You live in the mountains," he said. "You don't understand."

He put his hands against the stove and watched her spread out his great-coat and stack his rifle in the corner. All her movements were so quiet, so sure. She was part of the peace that was stealing into his blood. He fought against it. He tried to think evilly of her and of their companionship, to look at her with hot eyes. She was beautiful. She was given into his hands. The forest walled them off from the world. He had only to will—to desire.

But his thoughts slipped from his control. He pictured some other man—a faceless shadow—who would come home each night after the day's toil, whom she would meet, not in fear but in tender welcome, who would sit with her by the fire and speak of the day's happenings, of the sleeping

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children, who would drowse away in the knowledge of other days to come as peaceful and untroubled—who would grow old with her—

He flung himself down impatiently on the bench.

"What are you doing?" he burst out. "Why don't you speak?"

"Wait, I am looking for something." She came to him, and her fearlessness tore the thought out of his mind like an evil weapon. "It is my brother's old pipe," she said gently. "He carved it himself and was so proud of it. He smoked it the last night. But I think he would like you to have it—a comrade. There is little tobacco left in the jar."

"Thank you," he mumbled. He took the pipe from her, and it was his hand that shook. "What are you making there?" he asked.

For she had gone back to her place by the candle-light and had picked up her knitting.

"I am making warm things for the people in the village—for the children. But there are not many children left. They are dying of the cold and hunger."

"Other children must come," he said significantly.

"They must be less sorrowful."

"They will have a great inheritance. Great glory. We shall have won it with our blood for them."

She looked up.

"They must be proud of us."

He did not answer. He stuffed the bowl of his pipe, and for a while there was no sound but the soft clicking of her needles. Her hands came and went ceaselessly. They were beautiful hands, big and capable. Her head was bent, and the fire glow, brightening as the night crept up about them, filled her eyes with tired shadows.

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"You gave me all the food you had," he said suddenly.

She smiled a little.

"That is nothing. My poor old fowls may lay again to-morrow. Nowadays one must often go without."

"But there is always a full basket at the village cross."

"The little children——!"

He muttered impatiently.

"Folly! Each man for himself."

She put her hands down for a minute. She looked very young and wise.

"You say that because you've forgotten."

"What have I forgotten?"

"What you knew when you were quite little."

He laughed.

"I never knew much that was of any good to me." She went on working, and he sat forward, his brows knitted, his chin resting in his hand. He wanted to shout at her, "This has got to end; this can't go on." He goaded himself. Suspicions like snakes writhed in his mind. What was behind her calm? She was fighting him, he knew that, but with what weapons? Or didn't she care? Was she merely a loose woman whom his imagination transfigured? Would she laugh when he caught her in his arms? Or was it the recognition of the high duty in whose name he came to her?

He hated her in that moment, loathed her strangely and bitterly.

"It's so quiet here," he muttered. "The quiet makes everything unreal; one can't get away from it. It seemed to follow me all day in the forest."

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"Silence is terrible when one is not at peace with God," she answered.

"How you talk of God! Like a child! Do you really believe in heaven and angels singing and saints in white robes?"

"I believe in God."

"Well, you wouldn't if you were me; if you'd seen the things I've seen. You might believe in the devil."

"I do believe in the devil. Only I know God wins in the end."

"Women's talk!" was his repeated sneer.

"Perhaps women remember things that men forget," she said wistfully.

Again she silenced him. She troubled him as though she had indeed reached down into the deep places of his mind and touched a forgotten memory. He got up and moved restlessly about the room. At last he came close to her and stood over her.

"Look at me!" he commanded. She obeyed, lifting her eyes straight to his. They were bright with sudden tears, and that which he had meant to say died on his lips. "Listen," he said. "Last night, you told me, you tried to make me lose my way—you wanted me to die out there, and then afterwards you took me in—you fed me——"

"You were so helpless."

"Yes, but you've been kind to me since then. Even now you speak to me as if I were a friend, and when I came in to-night you looked for a minute—almost glad——"

"I had been dreaming," she answered quietly. "I heard your step outside on the snow. It seemed to me that he was coming back—as he did that last time—at dusk. And now, in that uniform, when you sit

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there smoking in his old place, it is so easy to imagine——"

His clenched hands relaxed. He turned heaven away.

"It was I who promised to write to you—after he died," he said. "And I forgot."

She was not working now. Her hands lay idle in her lap.

"I didn't hear, not for weeks and weeks. I used to go down into the valley and watch for the postman. But he never came."

"You—you loved your brother so much?"

"We lived together here ever since my grand-people died. The Althof belonged to us. We had always been great friends. I had only had one other playfellow in all my life."

"He told me about you, the last night—before the attack. He was one of the new draft, and I only saw his face the next morning—afterwards. He had not fired a shot. He looked quite happy."

"I knew that he was happy."

He turned on her with a sudden bitter anger.

"Why? Because he had killed no one? On, yes. He told me what you had said. And yet you would have killed me."

"Because I thought you were an enemy—coming to take what was mine—I who had never hurt you. And if anyone came against my home—my country—I would defend it. I would fight them—kill them, but I would not go out against them. I would not take what was theirs."

"Wild, ignorant talk! We attack only to defend."

Her hands were tightly interlocked.

"Is that true? I know—we're very ignorant up here; we don't hear much—only what they tell us."

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But Hans said that *they* were a weak people. They knew it meant death. And we had promised to defend them."

He made a violent gesture.

"They stood in our way—they had to go. It was for Germany—for our country. It was justified. The weak must yield to the strong."

"That isn't true—that isn't true!"

Again that distant thrill of memory.

"Be silent! If you dared say that where I have come from you would be shot. You don't love your country."

"Perhaps I don't. I don't know. I love this house—the forests—the dear people—I'd die for them. It wouldn't be loving them if I sinned for them."

And all the time he had been coming nearer to her. He had been lashing his fury against her, conjuring up bestial pictures with which to overwhelm the enemy within himself. But she did not falter. There was something earnest and childlike in her bearing, as though her eyes that met his inflamed scrutiny saw nothing but the virtue in him. He hesitated, and in that brief pause the silence regained its mastery. It encompassed him like a sweet, drowsy mist. It seemed to well up out of his own heart.

He turned away, hiding his face from her.

"It's getting late," she said with a tired sigh.

From the shadow he watched her take the heavy Bible from its niche. She sat facing him, with the light between them, and turned over the musty leaves reverently. And he had a vision of generations of her people sitting in the same place, reading from the same book. He saw them, the grim, kindly men and women, holding with strong hands to their iron and narrow faith.

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Her lips moved as she read. She was spelling out the words earnestly and painfully, like a child. The light shone in her face and painted a dim gold about her head. He thought of a church which he and his comrades had once ravaged. From the broken altar a grave and beautiful Madonna had looked down upon them.

The old revolver lay unheeded upon the table. He re-loaded it and pushed it across to her, his eyes lowered.

"Take it. I am not afraid."

"Neither am I afraid," she answered.

She carried the candle over to the window and looked out.

"The storm is coming up again," she said. "One can't see a single star. It would be terrible if one didn't know that the morning would come again."

He did not answer. His breath came quick and shallow. But he could see no trace of trouble in her. Her bosom rose and fell peacefully. He had a feeling that he himself was unreal—only a dark, malevolent shadow. He followed her to the foot of the stairs. He was reeling, his fists clenched, his face flushed and distorted—like a drunkard; like a man who staggers under a crushing burden.

She turned and looked down at him.

"Good night."

"Good night," he muttered.

He followed her with his eyes till she vanished overhead into the darkness. There was now no light in the room but the bright glow from the stove. For a moment he stood motionless and irresolute. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, he carried the open Bible to the firelight and read what she had read.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain

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mercy. . . . Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. . . . ”

The old wolf-hound limped to the front of the stairs and lay there—watching him.

II

The fire still burned steadily, but it seemed to him that the room was growing colder and darker. The night that had been rising up the mountain-sides crept under the doors and through the crannies. It advanced steadily, resistlessly. He felt as though he stood on a little sandy island in the midst of a great sea, and that the sand was being washed away from under his feet.

The shadows that lined the walls had blackened, sharpened in outline. He watched them distrustfully. He knew that they hated him, just as the dog whose unblinking eyes followed his every movement hated him. Each winter's night for a hundred years they had been there. It was their dwelling-place. They were the familiar spirits who had waited on birth and death, who had known the men and women who had once lived among them.

They had seen the first—they would see the last.

And he was an interloper, an enemy threatening that which they guarded.

He perceived these things more clearly as the silence deepened. It was as though secret faculties had been born in him and now stood shivering on the threshold. The dense wrappings of strength and brute courage which had shielded him in months of horror had been stripped from him.

Here they availed him nothing.

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He listened for some sound overhead. But none came. And it was not the silence of sleep. It was poised above him—like a wave before it breaks.

He got up and began to move about. He had need to reassure himself of his own reality. His world was melting in mist and shadow. Only she remained definite, a clear light on the dim flood which was rising about him, carrying him farther and farther from the things he knew.

He went over to the window. He could see the snow as it hurried past in silent, countless legions. The dull reflection from the fire lit up the stem of a gaunt tempest-riven fir tree. It stood out there in the cold and darkness like a forlorn, misshapen ghost—watching.

He tried to lay fast hold of his life; to re-picture his comrades, the daily filth and misery, the desperate attacks, the bitter hand-to-hand struggles, the frantic stabbing and slashing, man against man, the orgies which had broken the murderous monotony of their lives.

But it was all unreal. It slipped away from him. He had dreamed these things. He was still dreaming. The reality awaited somewhere beyond his sleep—beyond the night.

And he could not wake. He tried, and suffered intolerably.

"It's the cold and hunger," he told himself.

He began to look for food, knowing that there was none. He opened every chest and cupboard, moving silently, fearful of his own shadow, of the sound of his own breath. And in the storeroom behind the *Wohnstube* he stumbled against something round and heavy.

He struck a light. For a moment he was incredu-

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lous. Then he began to tremble like a man who, in deadly agony, has found an opiate to his hand. The light flickered and went out. But he had no need of light. Exerting his whole strength he carried the barrel into the sitting-room and set it on the table. He fetched a bowl from the dresser and filled it. He did not even wait to taste, but drank in great, thirsty gulps. The crude, native wine rushed through his blood in a flood of fire.

He left the tap running, and the wine spilled over the floor. It ran about, in and out of the shadows, like a living thing seeking escape. The wolf-hound sniffed at it and drew back growling.

At first he drank only in the desperate need to reaffirm himself—to regain his world. There was torture in his thirst. But little by little the things that had evaded him crystallised—grew real. The earth steadied under his feet. He knew what he was and whence he came. And he began to drink for the joy of drinking. He laughed out loud. He lifted his bowl to the shadows and taunted them.

Now everything was clear and simple. He was alone in this house with this woman. She had been given into his hands. The law commanded—justified him.

He stretched his arms above his head like a t waking from sleep.

The old wolf-hound rose up, bristling, showing his yellow fangs. They watched each other, knowing that it was to the death.

Then the man feinted cunningly. And the next instant his great hands met round the dog's throat, the thumbs pressed down through the fur to the windpipe, stifling that one yelp of agony and warning.

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III

The stairs murmured under his tread. They, too, warned her. Underneath and all about him the spirits of the place were alert, rustling and scurrying in dread, impotent horror. He lurched, groping blindly, his hands sliding over the walls. The darkness was suffocating, almost solid. He felt it pressing thickly against his face, in black swathes, holding him back. It hid chasms—death-holes.

Even now he tried to move quietly, as though he were afraid of rousing a power stronger than himself. He had learnt to move quietly. At night, out there in No Man's Land, life had depended on stealth.

And up here in this choking obscurity it was more than life.

The thin golden strip at his feet checked him, but only for an instant. Suddenly he flung himself against the door, bursting it open.

She had waited for him. She had known that he would come. She knew his purpose. She stood opposite him with her back to the wall like some noble forest thing that has been hunted down and now turns, asking no mercy, to meet the last fight. Her hands were hidden behind her; her eyes, dark and alert, never left his face.

"It's no good," he warned her; "there's no one to help you here. I don't care what weapon you're hiding; it won't save you. Do you think I've come back from *that* to be frightened by any living thing?"

"You will not touch me," she answered with subdued triumph.

The candle stood on the table between them. It had almost burnt itself out. Its tiny golden tongue waved in the draught, and threw quiet, moving

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shadows on their faces. But to the man the room was full of the redness of his brain. He closed the door swiftly behind him, shutting out the invisible witnesses that had followed at his heels up the dark stairs.

"You thought you'd beaten me," he stammered thickly. "You thought you'd fool me, that I'd be helpless because you're good and believe in God. Listen to me. Other women have believed in God, and it hasn't helped them. They've been good, and we haven't had any pity. We're masters, and what we do is law. No one has a right to call us devils; I know what you've been trying to do, but it won't serve you. Because I don't believe in God. I believe in the good German fist. I'm a soldier, and a soldier does what he's told. I've had my orders. I've never disobeyed yet; I'm not going to begin now. I'm not going to be shot because you're good." He made a violent gesture. "You're a traitress. You're trying to make me a traitor—you're trying to make me think things I don't want to think—to feel like a devil, when I'm in the right—when I'm doing my duty. But you shouldn't have forgotten that wine. It put me straight—made me see clear—to know what I want, and by God"—he lurched heavily towards her—"give me that knife, or whatever you've got there. It's no good. You belong to me. It's the law. If your own brother were here now he couldn't stand between us."

She was in his arms. His kisses had been rained savagely upon her eyes and lips. Now suddenly, as though he had been struck by lightning, he let her go. She slipped away from him against the wall, her head thrown back, her eyes blind with tears.

"Oh, Helmut! Helmut!"

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He stared about him stupidly. He had been asleep and someone had called to him. In a minute he would wake up to a warm summer's afternoon in the pine forest, and something brown and leaping and laughing would come to meet him through the trees.

"Helmut! Helmut!"

The cry had been so ringing clear—so joyous.

"Why—why do you call me that?" he muttered.

"You don't know; I never told you——"

She held out what she had hidden.

"I kept them all these years."

He took her pitiful weapons from her—the yellow withered posy, the crumpled sheet of paper, torn out of a school-book, and covered with a sprawling boyish hand—

"My Lenchen is like the running brook."

His arms dropped to his side, broken of their strength. Suddenly his blood was cold and quiet. The fever and fury of desire were gone like a quenched fire.

This was the reality—from a long way off he had come to find it—not glory nor power nor duty, but this simple white room and Lenchen—brown Lenchen, the playfellow, the loving comrade who had remembered—and himself—monstrous, unholy.

He kept on turning the flowers over and over in his hand. The gay coloured ribbon of the *Quinta* had faded. He remembered how he had cut it off his cap, how he had hidden the posy in his blouse so that his mother shouldn't know what he was doing. And that long, funny poem! He had lain awake for hours trying to think of a rhyme for "brook."

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That last evening together—the heart-break of that parting.

He had forgotten. But he had never loved anyone else.

It was quite still between them. He laid the posy gently on the table. He did not look at her. He lumbered blindly to the door and along the dim passage to the stairs. They were silent now. He stumbled over the dead body of the old wolf-hound. His feet slipped in the spilled wine.

He did not know that she followed him. He tore the bolts back. The snow was already on his face when he heard her calling. He looked back and saw her standing against the firelight.

"Helmut, come back—come back; it's death out there!"

He shook his head.

"I must go away," he said. "I must go away."

He said it over and over again with a dull insistence. Out there the darkness might hide him—even from himself.

But she had dropped down by the table. He heard her sob. And suddenly he ran back and knelt down, pressing his face against her hands, crying in an awful abandonment of drunken grief.

CHAPTER IV

I

THE next morning they cleared the snow away from the door and dug a hole in the frozen soil. And there they buried the old wolf-hound.

"His spirit will take care of me when you are gone," she said.

The man turned away so that she should not see his face.

And all that day it snowed, and soon the shallow grave was covered over and a white sea enclosed them. They scarcely spoke. They moved softly as though someone dearly loved were asleep after much sorrow. But it was not a terrible silence any more. It was the silence of the woods before the first flowers lift their heads above the winter's death—before the first song of the birds—the hush of re-birth.

And when it was dark they sat by the red glow of the fire and listened to the footsteps of that which was coming to them through the night.

II

And on the third evening she looked up at him as he stood silently beside her.

"How big you've grown, Helmut!"

"How pretty you are, Lenchen!"

They smiled at each other sadly.

"So you do remember that?"

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"I remember everything. Now it seems to me that it is the only real thing that has ever happened to me. I can remember every detail, as though it were yesterday. That last evening together—and the things you said to comfort me—such brave things. You were ready to defy all the dragons and ogres in the world, and you were so sure that I should be able to defy them. But you didn't know what the dragons were like."

"Poor Helmut!"

"But I did put up a fight. When they teased and bullied me at the crammer's I used to say to myself, 'It doesn't matter. I must be good and kind.' And I made a funny calendar of my own—nine squares divided into twelve little squares. And every month I scratched off one of the little squares. When the last big square had gone it would be time for me to come back to you."

"And then you forgot."

"Not all at once—never altogether. I cried at night for you—months and months. But then other things came. They seemed to know that you were their enemy, for they crowded you out. And I wasn't strong enough to keep you. I had to go their way or your way—and you weren't there. I couldn't cry any more—so I laughed. I thought we had been two children making foolish, impossible plans."

"It must have seemed like that," she whispered.

"But it was not real laughter," he said earnestly, "and I never really forgot. You see how I've remembered. And often you've tried to come out of your hiding-place in my heart. And sometimes I listened—less and less, I know, as time went on. But now you've come back altogether."

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She leant forward, her chin cupped in her hands, gazing into the firelight.

"I never forgot at all. I don't know why it was, but you meant so much to me. You were such a strange, sad little boy. Somehow you changed everything. You made me think about things. I began to understand the wicked people that the Pastor used to talk about. I had always thought that they weren't real, or had lived a long, long time ago. But after you had told me of poor Karl, I knew that they were still there and that they were very cunning, terrible people."

"Oh, Lenchen, is that all I did?"

She shook her head.

"I never played with any other little boy after you left. I didn't want to. And I thought it would hurt you if you knew. You see, I did know somehow how hard it would be for you, and I wanted you to feel that I was always there, ready and waiting; I thought perhaps it would help."

"Did you think I would come back?"

"I knew."

"And when I came?"

"I recognised you at once—even that first night in the storm. I just felt that it was you. When you were beating at the door, I said to myself: 'That's Helmut wanting to come in.' And I couldn't fail you—whatever it cost." She drew a deep, noiseless breath. "Afterwards I was surer still. Everything had changed, except your eyes, and they were just the same, so blue and—and troubled-looking."

"But you sat there—all night—watching me—like an enemy."

She shook her head.

"No, not like an enemy. You don't know what

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was in my heart; you were someone I had to protect. I couldn't have let you do anything wrong—anything that would have made you sorry all your life."

"You—you would have shot me, Lenchen?" he whispered.

"Oh, Helmut, I don't know, I don't know. I just prayed to God that I might be strong."

"Why didn't you speak?"

"I had to wait. The time hadn't come. You were too far off. But I felt that you would come nearer and nearer, and then—then I should only have to say one word."

He sat down on the bench beside her, hiding his trembling.

"But, Lenchen, there have been other people in your life—someone else. I've been thinking of him all these two days. There must be someone for whom you are waiting, who will come back, and love you and make you happy?"

"There has never been anyone but you."

He took her two hands between his. He bent over them and kissed them.

"I love you, Lenchen."

She smiled tremulously.

"I am so glad, Helmut. Because I love you too. And we've been engaged people such a long, long time."

They looked at each other, but the tears blinded them.

"My Lenchen—my own sweetheart!" He had come out of the striving and tumult on to a quiet height, and before him was all his life to come. He could trace the peaceful path on which they would go together. The hideous union that was to have

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been forced upon them would become blessed and holy. Almost he could have said to her in that moment of thanksgiving: "I believe in God."

But he looked down and saw the hands that held hers. He spread them out before him in the fire-light. And he saw that they were red and filthy, and that the filth spread up—up to his breast—to his throat; he could taste the loathsomeness of it upon his lips. And suddenly, with a cry of anguish, he stood up. "Oh, Lenchen—Lenchen! What have I done?"

III

The night wore on heavily, and there was no sound in the room but that of the man's voice. He leant forward, his chin resting in his hand, and looked into the red glow of the fire as though it were there that he saw the things that he had done. And she followed his eyes, seeing with him. Her face was pale and grave, but she made no sign of hurt. Her hands were clasped in her lap in a gesture of unconscious innocence.

And for a while he forgot her. It was to himself he spoke. It was to the tribunal of his own soul—horror-stricken, quivering and revolting—that he told the story of his manhood. He picked out each filthy blood-stained thing, and held it up, and saw it for the first time for what it was. All that had been splendid and heroic—all that seemed to become a man—putrefied under that final scrutiny. He tore the gold trappings of kingship and glory from it, and the body crumbled to a heap of dust.

"And we believed that it was right—as though God himself had told us," he said. "The kindest and best of us, we did these things—as we gave our

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lives—without question. There was only one sin left in the world, the sin against Germany."

"As though our forests would want these things of us," she said simply.

At the end he told her of Heilig—of that last watch together—and of how he had struck the dying man across the mouth.

"That was the saddest thing of all, Helmut."

He lifted his eyes to hers. He read in her face the tragic knowledge of that which in this hour had become clear to him. Their love remained. But the gulf between them was too wide. Not all the toil and passion of their lives could build the bridge across.

And yet surely there was some way—some other way.

"I have come back, Lenchen, but I have lost you."

They had taught him to believe only in the hard, tangible realities—realities that a man's hands could make and break. It was strange to sit close at her side with the gods whom he had obeyed giving him right and power, with his own youth and love beating in his blood, and to know that in a little while he would be gone.

So that after all there were things in a man's soul stronger than armies, stronger even than his own desire.

He looked at her hands, lying there so quietly. He had a humble longing to touch them—to hold them as he had done in that brief glimpse of happiness an hour ago. But he could not. He was like a man in a dark and filthy cell, gazing between the bars of his prison at the distant fields.

"Lenchen, it would have been better to have left me out there——"

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She started, and as though she had divined his thought, she took his hands and gently kissed them each in turn. And he could have cried with the pain of it.

"Oh, no, Helmut. It isn't that—you mustn't think that. Only it's so sad—they've spoilt all our lives—those wicked people."

"I am one of them, Lenchen."

She shook her head.

"I knew that you were not—you were such a kind, loving little boy."

"But I am not that little boy any more."

That was the inexorable truth. He was not the same. He could never be the same again. Not all his tears and remorse could give him back what *they* had taken from him. They could mend his body; they could not give him healing for the deeper sickness.

He sat with his face hidden for a while, thinking of his crippled, tainted youth.

But was there no way—no way in the world by which a man could retrace his steps?

And strangely, at that moment, he thought of the sun that even now was rising splendidly to their horizon.

"Everywhere there are people sitting by the fire—like we are," she said under her breath, "breaking their hearts."

"What can we do, Lenchen?"

"We're so weak."

"It would be so easy just to give way, to take what happiness we can get. We're just two people among millions—what can we do?"

She had grown tense and eager with the thought that came to her.

Towards Morning

"It would have been easy just to have shot down those poor people—Helmut—he was just one man."

For an instant his whole being rose up in revolt.

"And it was no good. He didn't save them!"

"He knew that. But he did something—something bigger than that. I don't know, it's all so dark and difficult, but I think—soon—I shall understand."

"He told me," He had whispered. "He told me just before he died. He seemed to think that all over our country there were people like himself, lonely, helpless people, who were doing what he did, giving their lives, their happiness, to redeem the others—the others who would come after, so that they should be happy—and all the things that we have done forgotten and forgiven. He told me to remember what he said, if ever the time came——" He stopped, blinded for the moment by the sudden light. "He said, 'Even as you may give your life, Helmutchen '——'"

For a long time they were quite silent. They sat close to one another, their hands tightly interlocked—staring ahead like people who are being drawn more and more swiftly towards the cataract. But when he spoke again it was as though in the last minute of that dread journey they had talked together, exchanging each thought, answering each question.

"So I shall go back," he said, "and I shall tell them that what they bade me do was a foul and evil thing. That I have disobeyed them—and that I shall never obey their law again."

"And then—they will kill you, Helmut."

He did not answer, and suddenly they clung to one another in despair and revolt, that last supreme revolt of their bodies against the inexorable spirit.

Towards Morning

"Oh, Helmut, Helmut—and we don't know—we don't know—perhaps this is the only life we have."

"My Lenchen—my own darling——"

"Helmut—don't go—don't leave me!"

"Oh, Lenchen—it must be soon, quite soon, we couldn't bear it—my little love——"

They cried together pitifully. But gradually the storm passed. They had gone under in the darkness and tumult, but now they were being borne swiftly on the deep flood. She crept closer into his arms.

"Let us be quite happy now—don't let us think of anything—but just that we are sitting here together by the fire—in our own little home. Let's pretend that you came back—and that it's been like this for years and years and that now we are old, old people. And that even if to-morrow we are parted we shall have had our happiness—and that it cannot be for very long."

He kissed her brown hair softly.

"And we'll talk about the old days—up there—on the Ludwigshöhe——"

"And the Sandtorte—do you remember?"

"And the old witch's cottage."

"You said it was the Forsthaus."

"I was such a silly little boy."

Their voices dropped to whispers. And sometimes there were long silences.

They did not notice that the firelight had grown dim. They did not see the deeper shadows rise up like watchers whose task is done and creep away.

IV

It was not snowing any more. Overhead the grey mists were breaking. One could see pale touches of

Towards Morning

blue amidst their floating draperies, and far away on the peaks of the distant hills the snow sparkled in the first light of morning.

"The dear, dear earth," she whispered.

"That is what Heilig said—'The dear, dear earth.'"

He took her in his arms, and for the last time they kissed each other. For a long minute they remained locked together—silent and motionless.

Then he went on, ploughing strongly through the deep snow, valleywards.

The Herr Amtschreiber came out of the quiet room, closing the door softly behind him. He saw old Anna standing with clasped hands by the window, and he blinked his eyes, trying to make sure that she was really so old, that all those years had really passed.

"You must go home," he said. "You must be very tired."

"It doesn't matter, Herr Amtschreiber. One can rest now."

"Yes, that's true, one can rest now."

He put his hands against the majolica stove, warming them. He felt very cold, as though he could never be warm again.

"Good night, Herr Amtschreiber."

"Good night."

He did not move until he heard her heavy, listless footsteps pass down the passage and the subdued click of the latch. Then he shambled over to the table, littered with papers and old letters, and sat down with his head between his hands.

Towards Morning

For a long time he sat there, so still that he seemed to fade into the greyness and shadow of the room. Before him, under his eyes, was the open page of that day's *Tagblatt* filled with black-bordered death notices of the fallen. And one among them was larger, prouder than the rest.

"Hauptmann Heinrich von Prütwitz."

"Knight of the Iron Cross—second class,

"Who died the hero's death for Kaiser and
Fatherland

"On the 15th of December, 1916."

And underneath was a long list of his people.

The Herr Amtschreiber turned over the disordered pile of letters with shaking fingers. Some of them were yellow-edged and covered with a stiff school-boy's writing. Others were more recent, bolder and briefer. The last was written on a sheet of official notepaper by some stranger's hand.

"Helmut Felde—at dawn—for disobedience in face of the enemy."

Gradually night came into the room, and to the Herr Amtschreiber that weariness which muffles even the worst sorrows of the very old.

And so he fell asleep—suddenly and peacefully.

And in his sleep he dreamed that he heard an infant crying.

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